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Rigorous Honesty:
An Ongoing Wrestling Match with Happiness and Fear

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**Rigorous Honesty:
An Ongoing Wrestling Match with Happiness and Fear**

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Thesis

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Abstract

Rigorous Honesty: An Ongoing Wrestling Match with Happiness and Fear

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In my thesis, *Rigorous Honesty: An Ongoing Wrestling Match with Happiness and Fear*, I will examine the role of fear and ego in my artistic practice and collaborations with other artists. My investigation is based around the concept of The Process vs. The Ticket mentality. At UT, I've committed fully to the process of creating and mounting new work. This has helped to combat the "Ticket" mentality or, thinking of each project as a ticket to widespread success, acclaim of financial gain. Additionally, I have craved and sought out close scrutiny and critique from my colleagues and professors. This commitment to the "process" of UT has helped me find moments of joy, connection and artistic breakthrough. While I still struggle with fear, jealousy and ego, I've been able to adopt concrete strategies to keep the focus on my work and my own personal version of success.

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INTRODUCTION

I want to describe the worst feeling in the world. It's your first semester in the University of Texas at Austin MFA Playwriting Program. It's a great program and you're lucky to be here. You're sitting in a writing workshop. The class is led by a kind, brilliant professor. The room feels intimate, comfortable, safe. You look out the window and catch a glimpse of the beautiful Austin sunshine. You've had your coffee, a sandwich, plenty of water. And best of all, you're surrounded by students, like yourself, who want to spend three years talking about writing and plays and structure and all the obsessions you've been chasing forever. And they're nice! They're not arrogant or mean or petty or careerist. They're supportive, but honest. Rough but tender. They're perfect.

And so you're listening to a play. A play written by one of those kind, supportive, non-mean, non-career-obsessed classmates. And the play is good. Like, really good. The dialogue is sharp and funny. The theatrical world is layered, specific, well researched. The plot moves, the ending works, the language sings, the play is just freaking *good*.

So, why are you miserable?

Why are you anxious?

Why is your first thought, "Oh no. This is really good."

Why is your next thought, "My play isn't that good."

Why is your next thought, "I should have written a play like *that*."

Why, indeed?

In my three years at UT, I have wrestled. The degree is called a Master of Fine Arts, but I haven't mastered anything. I've been flailing in the dark. I've been trying to catch a greased watermelon in a swimming pool. I've wrestled with myself; my art, my insecurities, my limitations. I've wrestled with classmates who sometimes feel like they're from a different planet. I've wrestled with my own playwriting students, my role as an instructor and the jump into a strange new world of assumed authority and supposed expertise. I've wrestled with 100-degree heat, bad dates, shitty apartments, and the green salsa that wasn't supposed to be that spicy. But mostly, I've wrestled with ego, jealousy and fear.

In my thesis, I'd like to investigate where all this wrestling has gotten me. Am I any different than I was three years ago? Am I a better artist? A better person? When I think of life goals, professional or personal, the equation is pretty simple: I want to be happy and I want to be productive. In order to achieve these seemingly straightforward goals, I want to embrace a life of rigor, openness and exposure. My hope is these values guide not only my individual writing practice, but help form my identity as a theater artist and collaborator. In other words, for me, it's not only about sticking to a writing schedule or producing pages, but also sharing those pages with colleagues, making myself receptive to critique and deep scrutiny. In my thesis, I'll explore the progress I've made toward

these goals, where I've fallen short and make an attempt to identify some tangible strategies to adopt as I move forward in my professional journey.

When I think of happiness, I also think of fear. Fear lives with me. It influences my choices, blocks off potential roads to growth, handcuffs me to routine and comfort. And my other friends, jealousy and ego? They live right down the block. (What a neighborhood!) Without getting too self-help book about it, that fear keeps me from getting what I want. Any risk, any jump I don't take is because I'm afraid. Afraid of failure, embarrassment, pain. Fear can be absolutely paralyzing. It also drains a tremendous amount of energy.

When I first arrived at UT, I was pretty unhappy and I didn't understand why. Here I was, about to embark on a three-year artistic adventure and I couldn't let myself enjoy it. Sure, part of this was due to normal first-year jitters, new town, new people, it's so frickin' hot, etc. But the main thing was this: I was still carrying the weight of every other graduate school that had rejected me. I never took the time to feel proud or excited or successful. There was too much to worry about, too much energy to waste on missed opportunities, perceived slights. And these feelings never completely went away; I struggle with them daily.

Last semester, I took a screenwriting class with visiting UT professor, Alex Smith. Alex writes and directs independent films. One of the highlights of the class was hearing about the eternal struggle to get these films made. Finding actors, producers, financiers. Filmmaking is a never-ending cycle of starts, stops, breakthroughs and dead ends. And yes, most of it sounds terrifically frustrating. But I also found it inspiring. Alex believes in his films so much that he's willing to go through something resembling hell to give them life. His career is guided, not by visions of success or acceptance or money, but an unshakeable faith in the work he is doing.

In class, Alex cautioned against viewing particular scripts or projects as "The Ticket". The Ticket mentality puts thoughts in my head like, "This is the script that's going to get me noticed, make me money, help me break into the business." I think everyone falls into The Ticket trap and it's totally related to fear. So, "This script is going to be my ticket" easily turns into "This script *has* to be my ticket." Why write a play if it's not going to get me somewhere? What if I commit hours, months, years to one script and nothing ever comes of it? It's a powerful, poisonous feeling. It infects my relationships with colleagues, fellow artists. Career envy can easily take over, "This person got their ticket, where's *my* ticket?" At time, these feelings are so strong, so overwhelming, that they seem impossible to overcome.

I've found the best way to combat The Ticket mentality is to focus on The Process. The Process asks you to put aside potential future awards and instead fully commit to what's directly in front of your eyes, the immediate task at hand. I think of bringing a script into workshop and seeking criticism and critique instead of praise and affirmation. I think of writing ten pages of new material and identifying the single line that's worth keeping. And most of all, it makes me reflect on the process of mounting a new play. This year brought production of two of my full length plays, *Poor Boys' Chorus* and *Lyla School*. These productions were fulfilling, because I wasn't focused on the outcome. I was focused on the process, the work, the day-to-day challenges of script revisions, staging, set construction, marketing. In these productions, I was striving for a Platonic ideal of what the plays could be. I was answering to myself and my collaborators, not to some imaginary critic or theater gatekeeper. My expectations of success were linked to personal fulfillment, not outward acceptance.

It seems natural to center this "Ticket vs. Process" investigation on my experience with *Poor Boys' Chorus* and *Lyla School*. *Poor Boys' Chorus* was produced on-campus at the Student Activities Center and ran November 7-16, 2014 with a total of eight performances. The production was directed by Natalie Novacek, an MFA Directing Candidate at UT. *Poor Boys' Chorus* is a coming-of-age love story set against the backdrop of a traveling carnival. Steeds, a young orphan, falls in love with Annabel, the richest girl in town. Steeds' older brother, Jackie, is violently opposed to the relationship

and does everything in his power to keep the young lovers apart. The play ends in tragedy, as seemingly innocent mistakes produce calamitous consequences.

Lyla School was also produced at UT, as part of UTNT, a showcase of full-length plays written by third-year MFA playwrights. The production was directed by Jess Hutchinson, an MFA Directing Candidate at UT, and was performed on December 6th and 7th in the Lab Theatre. *Lyla School* focuses on the friendship between Mary and Ahmed, two classmates at a progressive, arts-based elementary school. When a violent event occurs during a process-drama simulation, the two friends are driven apart. After a twenty-year separation, they return to Lyla School together and are forced to finally confront the trauma and tragedies of their childhood.

The process of translating these plays from page to stage was extraordinarily difficult. But in this struggle, I found I was able to tune out or at least turn down the volume on my fears and commit fully to day-to-day challenges of staging the plays. These processes required me to display vulnerability, risk embarrassment and admit limitations. And when I gave over to the work, invested in the process, I found unexpected moments of joy, breakthrough and pride. Somewhere in this productive struggle, I felt myself forging a true artistic identity. These “productive struggle” moments are proof positive that I can find happiness and gratification in my work, not only in the writing, but also in the sharing and collaborative building of the production.

I also want to investigate how my teaching experiences at UT have shaped and redefined my artistic identity. Teaching Playwriting served as an opportunity to closely examine my values as a writer and artist. I have been forced to confront my shortcomings, my lack of clarity and gaps in my knowledge. Teaching has been an exercise in humility and self-reflection. While I feel that my classes have been successful, overall, I've had moments of self-doubt and wrestled with questions like, "What do I really know about theater and storytelling?" I want to investigate what worked in my classes, what didn't and examine how fear and ego fed into my role as an instructor.

I don't want to wrap anything up or put a bow on my experience at UT. I want to be truthful about the pain and the disappointment, but also take time to appreciate the moments of growth and breakthrough. There's been a lot falling down and a lot of getting back up. Now, more than ever, I want to focus on moving forward, growing, failing, rebooting. I want to investigate the mysteries of happiness, how is it achieved and sustained? How will I find fulfillment in a career that promises almost daily rejection and tests of faith? At the end of any substantial experience, it's tempting to put some rose tint on the glasses, but I'll try to stay clear here. I want to take a hard, honest look at my work and my life.

SCRUTINY

I have a vivid memory of the first time I experienced a “post show talkback.” I was in high school, attending the JAW (Just Add Water) festival for the first time. JAW is a new play development festival in Portland, Oregon, my hometown. It was one of my first exposures to a reading or new work in general. I don’t remember the play all that well, but I do remember what happened *after* the play. The playwright sat on stage with the director and listened to the audience’s feedback. What they liked, what they didn’t, what questions they had, where they were confused. I remember sitting there, thinking, “This is awful.” My next thought was, “When my plays are performed, I am not doing this.” I had no desire for scrutiny, critique, close questions. My work would speak for itself. Any ideas for revisions would come from myself and my own huge brain.

I can probably trace this resistance to scrutiny back to my first experiences with theater. Like many a playwright, I started out as an actor, which came with a lot of praise and positive reinforcement. Acting was something I was *good* at. I had a nice loud speaking voice, I memorized lines fast, worked hard. Acting in plays felt like joining a special, secret club. I loved auditioning, rehearsing and most of all, performing. And oh, that applause! The laughs! The post-show compliments! What could be better? So my career, my future was set. Who wouldn’t want to pursue a path filled with applause and attention? I would play all the great roles. My life as an actor would fun, fulfilling and fabulous. Nothing could stop me.

So, why did I quit? Well, a few moments stand out. I remember at 16, an acting teacher telling me that I simply wasn't tall enough to be a leading man. I wasn't the boy-next-door. If I wanted a career as an actor, I'd have to fight tooth and nail for character roles. I remember acting classes in college that suddenly seemed to be 90% yoga, 10% scene study. I remember one of my college mentors, Daniel Kramer, told me bluntly that I had a nice "bag of tricks" as an actor, but if I wanted to be great, I'd have to tear down and start from scratch. I needed extensive physical training in Alexander Technique, Linklater Technique, Tai Chi. I needed to find my core, reengage with my five-year old self, discover my spirit animal, spend years truly learning how to "walk."

Basically, I quit acting once the scrutiny hit. Daniel was absolutely right about my "bag of tricks." In order to be great, I would have to come face to face with my limitations, my shortcomings, my fear of being vulnerable on stage. And I simply wasn't willing to put in the effort. Because I didn't love acting. I liked it, I loved the attention, but I wasn't passionate about the work. I was after The Ticket. My validation came from the product, the rewards, not the process. My teachers were telling me that if I really wanted to be an actor, I'd have to fight for it. I wasn't willing to fight; it wasn't worth it to me. So, what *was* worth it?

My move to writing was sparked by a healthy dose of self-scrutiny. I knew that I loved theater, but what *exactly* did I love about it? The light bulb moment came when one of my acting teachers basically told me to be a better actor, I had to turn my brain off. This was always hard for me, getting out of my own head and fully investing in the imagined world of the character I was playing. So, I thought, is there a role in theater where I could *use* my head? Instead of attempting to tune out my intellectual curiosity, my neuroses, my analytical instincts, could I instead *apply* them to my work? Was there a place for that?

I had actually always written plays. Or, more accurately, I had always wrestled with stories. I have a clear memory of being nine or ten years old, bored at a dinner with my grandparents, scribbling out movie ideas on a napkin. My favorite classes and assignments in school always involved some kind of creative writing. At summer camp, I wrote and directed an elaborate *Batman and Robin* spoof for the end-of-camp talent show. And in high school, I even made some clumsy attempts to write a full-length play. When I look back on these old scripts, I'm struck by the connection to my current work. I wrote about a little girl named Lucy who created her own imaginary world as a way to cope with the death of her parents. In one play, *Day 88*, a high school loner is driven mad by his acne medication and goes on a murderous rampage. While I think I've evolved as a storyteller, my inspirations and motivations aren't all that different from when I was a teenager.

ACCUMULATION OF VALUES

With regard to stories, I was always very clear on what I liked and what I didn't. The breakthrough came when I started analyzing *why* I liked what I liked. I started looking at plays and dissecting them on a skeletal story level. In my early-twenties, I started consuming more plays, reading more scripts, seeing different types of live performances. And I began systematically breaking down what I liked and why I liked it. On a certain level, this ruined stories forever. My role as an audience member changed, as I am now rarely able to simply "enjoy" theatrical experiences. Rather, I am actively searching for learning opportunities, things to steal, things to avoid.

I started to form a list of core values, qualities that stories I admired seemed to share. In the theater, I want to feel that I'm in the hands of a master. I want to feel manipulated, made to look one way so the story can surprise me with what's coming from the other side. I crave specificity in plays and feel let down by characters that come off as stock or stereotypical. I value cleverness, as my favorite stories tend to be little puzzles to be solved. And yet, I also take delight in the unexpected, the unreasonable, the insane story move I never saw coming. An unsolved puzzle can be satisfying and rich in its own way. These values have guided my artistic development and clarified my aims as a storyteller. I thought it would be helpful to provide a rough and dirty definition of these values below.

LIST OF VALUES

- **MOTION**- A sense of things happening on stage. Characters working for something, facing obstacles, making discoveries. Motion, to me, is tied to stakes, turns, revelations. Motion can be big (We have to diffuse the bomb!) or small (I need to tell this girl I like her).
- **MYSTERY**- Mystery keeps the audience in their seats, leaning forward. Mystery, simply, is an unanswered question. These questions can be planted early and paid off late. Mystery is valuable in any genre. If a play has no mystery, there's no reason for the audience to keep watching.
- **SURPRISE**- Surprise keeps a story from moving simply from Point A to Point B. Surprise is Point Z. Surprise keeps an audience unsteady, on their toes, unsure of where they are heading next. I connect surprise to unreasonableness; a play goes somewhere we never expected or thought it could go. Surprise makes life hard on the characters; they are faced with an unexpected obstacle and have to make an unexpected choice.
- **HUMOR**- Art is a reflection of life. For my money, any honest reflection of life has to include some humor. Life is sad and funny, often at the same time. Modern audiences, in particular, have little patience for humorless stories. Humor doesn't cheapen or lessen the impact of drama; in fact, humor makes stories richer, more honest.

- ***SPECIFICITY***- Specificity makes a play unique, memorable. I think of specificity in terms of location and world building. A 7-11 is a hell of a lot more interesting at three in the morning than it is at three in the afternoon. Audiences are more likely to give over to a world that feels textured, crafted, lived-in. Specificity helps us avoid stereotype, cliché and melodrama.
- ***ENDINGS***- An ideal ending is surprising, but inevitable. The audience is surprised at where the story ended, but if they look back, they see they were headed there the whole time. The ending point should never feel arbitrary or random. I abhor false endings, and get incredibly frustrated when a story breezes right by its natural conclusion. I want to grab the writer by the collar and yell, “The play ended perfectly five minutes ago and you missed it!” A great ending inspires feelings of satisfaction, delight and sadness. The end of a play is the full picture finally revealed.

In my own work, I use these storytelling values as a guiding force. My ultimate goal is to craft a structurally sound narrative that guides the audience towards an emotionally rich, satisfying ending. My values were starting to form before I started graduate school, but UT has been a place to test, challenge and deepen them. In classes, workshops, and rehearsals, I’ve had the opportunity to subject my values to scrutiny and see which ones hold up. I’ve tried to keep my values alive in my own work. This has been challenging, as values are easier to articulate than to execute.

POOR BOYS' CHORUS

The very first draft of *Poor Boys' Chorus* was written almost ten years ago. I was a junior in college, doing a semester at a program called The National Theater Institute. NTI is basically a three month long theater boot camp, located at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut. Classes run seven days a week, often from 7am-10pm with only meal breaks as a respite. The experience was stressful, insane, brutal. And it's probably the happiest I've ever been. It's also where I began to identify as a playwright for the first time. I had always written plays, but it was a personal, private practice. I had taken one class in college, but never workshopped a full-length or developed a play with actors.

At NTI, I wrote a One-Act play called *Annabel + Steeds Make Tracks*. It was about two detectives, Annabel and Steeds, who are investigating the disappearance of a child at a carnival. They interview the Master of Ceremonies, and eventually Annabel gets sucked into the strange, dangerous world of the carnival. The piece got a good response at NTI and my teachers encouraged me to expand the play into a full-length. I tinkered with it over the years, but nothing really emerged. At one point, I was convinced the story would only work as an epic film trilogy. Eventually, I resigned myself to the fact that I would likely never see Annabel or Steeds again.

And yet, my first year at UT, Annabel and Steeds came back into my life. For Steven Dietz's Playwriting Workshop, we were asked to write a 25-page play. I turned around several ideas in my head, wanting to make a good impression on my professor and classmates, as this was their first real exposure to my work. And suddenly, out of nowhere, Annabel and Steeds returned. I wrote the first ten pages of a play where a carnival comes to a small town and Annabel and Steeds begin a tentative, adolescent romance. I included a chorus of three "poor boys" who narrate the story and help drive the action. Suddenly, the play felt theatrical, alive, it had momentum. The ten pages came out in one burst and I realized that I liked what I had written. In fact, I liked it too much, so much so that I was afraid to bring it into the workshop. The play felt too close to my heart, I didn't want it to get "beat up" in a workshop setting.

When I think back now, I realize it was my old resistance to scrutiny rearing its head again. If I were to bring the play into workshop, I would be seeking praise, confirmation that I had crafted something really special. This particular workshop was notorious for its no frills, structure-based approach to writing and I wasn't willing to sacrifice the frills of *Annabel and Steeds*, just yet. So I put it away, but included the pages in my end-of-semester portfolio. In the end-of-semester meeting, my professors identified those pages as something worth chasing down, and I ended up working on the play in Suzan Zeder's playwriting course the following semester. I retitled the piece, *Poor Boys' Chorus*, partly

as a tribute to the chorus of boys who helped me see the theatrical potential in the strange, out-of-time world I'd created.

Flash forward about a year and I'm working on *Poor Boys' Chorus* with director Braden Abraham, a visiting guest artist from Seattle Repertory Theater. In addition to Braden, I'm also working with Natalie Novacek, from the MFA Directing program at UT.

Natalie read the first Act of *Poor Boys' Chorus* in our Professional Development Workshop (PDW) and related to the magic and romance of the world. I'll never forget the moment when Natalie came up to me in class and said very plainly, "I want in." This moment was so special, because suddenly I had a partner in crime. She was committed to staging a full production of *Poor Boys' Chorus* the following year. The PDW experience was an opportunity for us to experiment with staging and audience orientation. It also gave me a chance to see and hear what I had written in a physicalized, theatrical context. We had a committed team of actors, some basic set pieces and most importantly, rehearsal time with Braden.

Braden helped me essentialize the core systems of the play. Water and drowning emerged as the central images connected to Steeds' fear and guilt over the death of his father. We started to think about location; the carnival represents escape and possibility while Steeds' own home brings up feelings of dread and confinement. Braden worked with Natalie in staging some of the more complex, theatrical moments. But the memory

that will stay with me is a small one. We were rehearsing on the Lab Theater stage and to that point had been working with the curtain open. I don't remember who suggested it, but we decided to close the curtain, so our little theatrical universe would be completely closed off to the outside world. The effect was extraordinary. For a few hours, I forgot that I was in the Lab, at UT, or even part of a playwriting program. There was only the world of *Poor Boys' Chorus*. I was lost in the best way, fully engaged in a process that felt separate from my role as a student. When I think back, this was probably the first time I felt like an artist at UT.

Flash forward another six months, and I'm sitting in a rehearsal room. To my delight and terror, the production is actually happening. Our first rehearsal was a breeze; we read through the script, looked at costume sketches, everyone said how excited they were to be working on the play. But now it's the second rehearsal and things are about to change. See, this is the "question" rehearsal. Basically, we go through the whole play and stop any time an actor has a question. My mind goes back to sitting in the audience at JAW: isn't this everything I was trying to avoid? The actors identify moments of confusion, jarring time jumps, unclear character motivations. We go line-by-line, word-by-word. It's slow work and at first, it seems like a violation. How dare they question my beautiful play! And wasn't it yesterday that they were saying how much they loved it?

Here is where, in the past, fear and ego would usually take over. I would feel attacked, cornered, and would begin to shut myself off from the scrutiny. My muscles would tighten, my fear instincts would kick in and I'd gut through the process, waiting for it to be over. The questions would feel like judgments; scrutiny was an admission of failure. But this time was different. Those feelings were there, sure, but they didn't take over. Subjecting the play to this level of scrutiny was, in fact, sort of exhilarating. And I wasn't alone in the process. Sure, I would be the one making the revisions, but the ideas were coming from the room. I no longer felt precious about my work. I didn't feel the pressure to solve everything myself. My collaborators weren't adversaries; they were allies! Every person in that room had invested their time and energy in the process. It felt like a weight had been lifted off. I saw how excited the actors were, how much ownership they were taking. And there was so much work to be done. In some ways, I simply didn't have time anymore to engage with fear and ego.

As the rehearsal process continued, I began to crave and actively seek out this level of scrutiny. I no longer waited for others to offer their feedback or critique. Instead, I began to see where the problem spots in the play were and actively solicited outside input: "This scene really drags in the middle, does anyone have any ideas?" I started to understand how much work the creative team was putting into the production. Their high level of commitment inspired me to bring the same rigor to my work in revisions. Their confidence and investment fed *my* confidence and investment. This collective effort

helped me tamp down my own jealousy, fear and ego. Furthermore, I had a tangible, visible symbol of my team's commitment: a giant circus tent.

We had taken the closed curtain feeling of Braden's workshop and really run with it. Natalie and Teena Sauvola, A UT MFA Scenic Designer, decided that we would build our own circus tent, from scratch and the entire play would take under the Big Top, so to speak. This idea was ambitious and yes, maybe a little crazy. A good chunk of our budget and manpower went towards tent construction. But we drilled, hammered, hung and ended up with a gorgeous tent. Natalie even captured the whole process on time-lapse video.

The tent did two things: it reaffirmed the worth of my work and opened me up to deeper scrutiny. If someone was willing to build a whole tent, the play must have something going for it. I also became even more receptive to feedback and critique, because I saw how other people were counting on the play to be good. It was no longer just me, futzing around on my laptop. This was a team of artists, working their asses off, in an attempt to make something special. I owed it to them to make the script great and so once again; ego and fear took a backseat. There was simply no time for petty arguments or ego-driven debates. Rehearsal time was limited, the audience was coming, we had a TENT for God's sake and there was nothing to do but keep working, keep striving, keep pushing *Poor Boys' Chorus* to reach its potential as a story and a theatrical event.

It's one of the last nights of technical rehearsal and we're trying to figure out how to execute a complex magic trick on stage, involving drowning and escape. We experiment with putting the magician behind a screen and only seeing him in shadow. But the magician is supposed to be drowning, so we have to sync up the water sound with blue lights, the shadow of water rising. It is a tough night, to say the least. We can't quite achieve the right effect and people start to get tired and frustrated. At the end of the rehearsal, after the actors are sent home and we have a short production meeting. Keep in mind, this is close to midnight, we've all been on campus for hours and hours. And we still haven't solved our magic problem. In the past, I think this moment would have terrified me. I would have thought, "The play is going to suck, everyone will hate it, everyone will think it's my fault." And yet, sitting at the meeting, I'm not thinking that. In fact, I'm proud. I'm proud to be working with people who are stretching their boundaries, willing to go for something and yeah, maybe fail. We're packing up for the night and I suddenly feel the need to speak. I turn to my collaborators and say, very simply, "We are being very ambitious. And I think ambition is something to be applauded." It feels good to say it, it lifts people's spirits a bit, and when I finally get home in the middle of the night, I fall asleep with a smile on my face. If we're going to fail, at least we're going to fail big.

The production happens, the audience claps, we take down the tent and the carnival is over. And yet, the scrutiny doesn't end. Two months after *Poor Boys' Chorus* closes, I go back into rewrites. It's a funny thing, rewriting a play that's already been performed. I mean, what's the point? I can't go back and change the performances. I can't track down audience members and say, "Here's what really was supposed to happen in Act two." It's an ego blow to hear notes after a show has closed. Certainly, a big part of me wants the production to have been perfect. We put in all that work, isn't now the time to bask in praise and collect shiny awards?

But I couldn't stop. I had seen the play with clear eyes and there was no going back. I saw what was great about *Poor Boys' Chorus* and what was missing. I had the audience with me for the first Act, but somewhere in the second Act, plot complications seemed to eat the play. The audience isn't focused on what I need them to focus on; they're straying off the path. *Poor Boys' Chorus* ends with a tragic death and the audience must feel the whole play has led inevitably to this moment. So where was I losing them and why?

In going back, I see that I tried to solve character problems with plot moves. Jackie, the quasi-villain of the piece, enacts an elaborate revenge plot, which leads to Annabel leaving town and Steeds suffocating in the box. But the motivations aren't quite up to snuff. Jackie's plan is confusing, his motivations unclear. I keep getting the note, "What

is he so mad about anyway? What does he really want? Who is he trying to hurt?” Now, I realize that Jackie had become a victim of plot. He took actions, because I, as the writer, needed him to take those actions. They weren’t coming from a place of wound, of honest pain. Additionally, I wasn’t doing myself any favors with the level of premeditation in his revenge plan. Because the plan seemed so meticulous and thought out, it created an expectation in the audience for a payoff that I simply could not deliver.

To remedy this, I removed any sense of premeditation to Jackie’s actions. Instead, Jackie would react to the events in the play and have to scramble and scheme to get what he wanted. I always had Annabel’s first words to Steeds as “Tell your brother to stop staring at me.” This line suggested that Jackie had been stalking Annabel for a while before the play began. In my last rewrite, I changed it so the first domino to fall is Annabel talking to Steeds, which *then* forces Jackie to take action. The first image isn’t just Jackie staring at Annabel; it’s Jackie staring at Annabel because she is staring at Steeds. Eventually, in an effort to protect Steeds from heartbreak, Jackie is forced to reengage with wounds of the past, and his actions, while unpleasant, are justified. I simplified the plot, but tightened the web between the characters. Jackie went from a villain to a flawed, deeply human character. This shift opened up the play for me, complicated the character dynamics and made *Poor Boys’ Chorus* into a simpler, cleaner, more effective story.

I was only able to reach this realization after experiencing the play, not as its creator, but as an audience member. It's impossible to see the full shape of a play when reading it on a computer screen or in workshop. I needed to see how much time things actually took on stage, what the scenes looked next to each other. Scenes that seemed to drag in rehearsal now zipped by. It struck me that the Poor Boys' Chorus were doing a whole lot of furniture moving, a consequence of my short scene structure. Foundational lines were sometimes buried under unnecessary physical stage business. I needed to do a better job of highlighting the essential moments in the script and provide guidance on how to lift up those moments in production.

LYLA SCHOOL

The initial instinct for writing *Lyra School* came out of frustration with *Poor Boys' Chorus*. It was spring of my first year, and I was developing the *Poor Boys' Chorus* script in Suzan Zeder's playwriting workshop. Midway through the semester, I had reached a dead end. The story wasn't going anywhere and I had no idea how to get to the ending I wanted. Further, because the play takes place "out of time", I was having a lot of trouble crafting a specific theatrical world for the characters to inhabit. Also, frankly, I was running out of things for Annabel and Steeds to say to each other.

So, during spring break of 2013, I set to work on a new play, really to blow off steam more than anything else. I had the slightest of inklings to write a story about a violent event at an alternative elementary school. I had been inspired by a presentation about a school in Maryland called Lucy School. At Lucy School, deep in the woods, students acted out stories instead of doing book reports. They worked on art projects for weeks and weeks and solved conflicts through process drama simulation. There was something so strange and exciting to me about this place. But that was it. All I had was that feeling.

In that week off from school, I produced about fifty or sixty pages of brand new material, certainly the most I've ever written in that short of a span. The writing wasn't for class or for a submission. I was writing just to write, because it was fun, exciting, and pleasurable. Frustration can be paralyzing. I'm proud that I was able to translate my

frustration into productivity. The first year of graduate school is tough. In all of the scrutiny, feedback, feelings of failure, it's easy to lose the joy of writing. With *Lyla School*, I was able to locate that joy again. It was a process of pure inspiration.

Lyla School was also an opportunity for me to test some of my storytelling values. The characters of Ahmed and Mary always felt specific to me and they come into the play with deep wounds and buried secrets. I worked as an after-school elementary teacher for several years, and this experience helped me capture the specific rhythms and logic of children. I wrestled with balancing lightness and darkness. The central event in *Lyla School* is a school shooting, but I was able to find places for humor and levity. Most importantly, I tried to maintain storytelling momentum and build to an inevitable conclusion. I wanted to keep the audience a little off-balance and surprise them with where we ended up.

For a long time, *Lyla School* was my “secret play. I didn't want to hear anyone else's thoughts or suggestions. I didn't want to bring it into workshop. I wanted to keep it mine. I see a pattern now, as this was similar to how I felt with the first pages of *Poor Boys' Chorus*. Perhaps I need a period of preciousness with a play, before I throw it to the wolves, so to speak. Certainly, my relationship to a play changes once I invite scrutiny. A play begins as something private and cherished. But it's not alive. A play becomes real when it's seen through other's eyes, smudged with their hands, stretched out, turned

over, kicked around. The play isn't precious anymore, but it's stronger, deeper and more beautiful.

When I finally subjected *Lyla School* to scrutiny, one major note drove my revision process. While my initial draft had some strong moments, it didn't quite hang together as a full narrative. The main reason for this was a lack of intentionality in my time moves. The play shifted between adult and childhood scenes, but I hadn't come up with why the story moved that way. In my first draft, I had established an alternating pattern of Adult Scene/Childhood Scene, and this continued throughout the play. The pattern became predictable and static, and I realized it would lull my audience to sleep. So, I made the decision to divide the play in to three "movements". This helped me see a new shape for the play and made realize that my locations needed to be sharpened and specified. In the first draft, Mary and Ahmed meet at a hotel bar, but there is no *reason* for their meeting. I hadn't answered the critical question of "Why now?" To combat this, I made the change to have Mary and Ahmed meeting *at* Lyla School, on the twentieth anniversary of the shooting. The move into childhood scenes happened, because their very proximity to the school was forcing them to confront their memories. Instead of an arbitrary time pattern, I now had the play *yanking* the characters back into childhood. This time and location change helped me to raise and specify the stakes for Mary and Ahmed; they were now meeting at a *specific* time for a *specific* reason.

There's a wonderfully terrible thing that happens in revision. As soon as you solve one problem in your structure, that solution causes twelve different problems. Two years later, *Lyla School* was about to begin rehearsals for a production as part of UTNT. The director, Jess Hutchinson was working with me to clarify the time moves in the piece. We printed out the play and posted the pages on the wall. We then used different colors to mark the childhood and adult sections and saw quickly that the childhood sections took up an inordinate amount of space on the wall. I had always felt a certain drag towards the middle of the piece and there was now a visual answer to that problem. Anyone could see: the color scheme was off. The picture was almost beautiful, but not quite. And the answer was clear: we needed to check back in with the adults in the middle of the play, to keep the adult section alive in the audience's mind. The symmetry was pretty amazing as there was a clear hole in the middle where this new scene needed to go. Certainly, my "secret" play was not a secret any longer. It's up on the wall, with the major structural flaw on full display. In the past, maybe I would have been embarrassed or defensive. But that's not how I feel in this moment. The play is hurtling towards production and there's a simply a problem that needs to be solved.

As my structural issues began to resolve themselves, I now faced an entire new set of obstacles. We're in rehearsals now and having major struggles with the opening scene of the play. When *Lyla School* belonged only to me, this scene felt easy, straightforward. The two characters, Ahmed and Mary, haven't seen each other in twenty years. They're

covering this gap by speaking quickly, making jokes, feeling each other out. In my mind, on my computer, the scene makes sense. In rehearsal, the actors seem lost. The rhythms are off, they're dropping lines, missing beats, and I'm getting frustrated. The fear comes back. It's simply not fair: I've written a scene, meant to be performed in a certain way, and they're just not executing it. In my mind, I'm thinking, "You're wrecking it. You're not *getting* it." This fear starts to define my presence in the rehearsal room. I'm constantly interjecting; overwhelming the actors with sweeping, general statements about their characters. I tell myself I'm helping, but I know that I'm not. I'm after a quick fix, because the play opens in two weeks and I don't want to be embarrassed. I want it to be "right."

This need for "rightness" connects to The Ticket vs. Process struggle. Living inside The Ticket mindset, I crave simple, "right" answers. I'm wary of experimentation, risk, struggle, process. In essence, my core desire at this time is to skip the rehearsal process completely, breeze past the experimentation or "playing" stage of development. I'm after shortcuts, easy solutions. The play is set in stone, a ticket ready to be cashed in. As long as the actors "speak the speech", my genius will be crystal clear and the play will gain me success, acceptance, fame, praise. Committing to The Process is a huge risk. What if The Process doesn't work? What if it doesn't get me anywhere? What if no one can see how smart and talented I am?

Thank God for Jess. Where I was after an end result, Jess was invested in the process. She guided the actors towards playing actions instead of attitude. While I wanted the actors to speak faster, she wanted them to truly understand what they were saying. My notes come from a place of panic and fear (Go faster, you're not doing it right, you missed a word). Instead of giving line notes, Jess plants little ideas and questions about the characters. Instead of running the scene for the twelfth time, she has the actors pass a ball back and forth, chase each other around the room. Jess trusts the process, because she trusts the play. With her help, I start to trust it too.

And it works. In our first performance, the actors are on-point. The play feels lived-in, specific, alive. In the script, I crafted a big, "wow" moment towards the end, when Ahmed reveals he's been writing letters to Mary for twenty years. He's been carrying a suitcase and at a certain point, he unzips the suitcase and drops hundreds of letters onto the stage. Usually, when I'm watching my plays performed, I feel total panic. Every new scene is a chance for something to go wrong. However, this time, I'm not panicking. I'm actually *enjoying* it. The "wow" moment is coming up and the audience is still on the ride. They're invested and have no idea what's about to hit them. The letters drop and someone in the crowd actually gasps. It's an incredible feeling.

Maybe the next night, nobody gasps. Maybe the "wow" moment doesn't have the same magic. Maybe UTNT is the only life *Lyla School* will find. But I got that *one* moment,

and it worked with *that* audience and that is a victory. It makes me want to embrace the transient, ephemeral qualities of theater. No play runs forever, even *Cats* has to close. A book stays in print; a film is preserved on DVD or Netflix. But a play goes away. The tent comes down. In a Ticket mentality, this is terrifying. In The Process mentality, it's calming, freeing, satisfying. The product goes away, but the process, the experience stays with me. Every play, then, becomes another small victory, another building block. And while the applause fades, that gasp will stay with me.

ROLE OF FEAR IN MY WORK

I believe that theater should be a reflection of life. The role of a storyteller is to use symbol and metaphor to wrestle with foundational human questions and concerns. My plays tend to be about fear, because fear is something I wrestle with so much in my own life. Steeds is scared of the box, Ahmed is scared of being a bad father. I think I'm instinctively suspicious of characters that have it all together. I don't want to watch someone be comfortable, clever, on top of things. I want to see struggle, battlescars, failure. The concept of wound has always made a lot of sense to me. What happens when a character's protective casing is cracked? How does that change them? Wound, to me, is connected to motion, action, conflict. It's exciting to see people exposed. There's nothing more satisfying than beating a character up for two hours and then rewarding them with some small moment of happiness, relief or catharsis.

I based Magda's character in *Lyla School* on these ideas. Early in the play, Magda speaks to a scared student and says, "Fear is a little fence to jump over." This fence metaphor drives the play. And it's a fallacy. In the end, Magda is a villain, because she thinks fear can be conquered. *Lyla School* is really about fear as a constant, fear lives with us, fear guides us, hurts us, helps us, sharpens us. At the end of the play, Ahmed and Mary return to their place of greatest hurt. They wrestle with their fears and trauma of childhood, but there is no conquering, no winning out over fear. The play is really about taking the first step, a small attempt at facing their demons together.

I wonder if there's a place for fear to live in a rehearsal room. Certainly, in early rehearsals, the fear in the room is palpable. I'm scared I wrote the wrong scene, the director is scared she chose the wrong blocking, the actors are just terrified, in general. When Anne Bogart writes about embarrassment, in her book *A Director Prepares*, I associate that embarrassment with fallibility. No one wants to work with infallible collaborators. Or someone pretending to be infallible. Collaboration is an act of embarrassment. Seeking out creative partners is admitting limitations. Someone else can do this better than I can; someone else has a better answer to this question. Instead of faking knowledge that I simply do not possess, I began to embrace the phrase, "I don't know" and a great weight was lifted. "I don't know" isn't code for I'm stupid, or lazy, or unprepared. It simply means that this is not my area of expertise, I will help in any way I can, but someone else might have a better solution. And that's okay.

TEACHING

I had very specific goals for my Playwriting 1 class and put a lot of thought into designing my curriculum. My basis would be a set of foundational storytelling principles, which I outlined earlier in the thesis. To supplement, I would provide examples of stories that highlighted these specific values. The twist was that I wouldn't limit myself to plays. Instead, I would try to engage with more contemporary examples. I used the television show, *Sherlock*, to demonstrate how a mystery works, how the writer must carefully plant questions and provide answers, building towards the grand unveiling of the big reveal. We looked at some of my favorite sketch comedy shows, like *Mr. Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, to study how a good comedy scene efficiently sets up a situation, establishes the pattern of the central joke and builds to a surprising, funny ending or button. Contemporary sitcoms, like *30 Rock*, were a great vehicle to demonstrate objectives and obstacles, as the protagonist has a clear goal, faces various hurdles, and either achieves their goal or realizes that they want or need something different.

This pedagogy came from my frustration with encountering the same plays and playwrights over and over in my various writing classes. One of my fears as an instructor was that I would be simply regurgitating concepts from my own professors. I struggled with how to make my class specific, useful and unpredictable. I discovered the way to make the class my own was to carefully and deliberately choose my own texts and

supplementary material. As a student, I've encountered Chekhov over and over in playwriting classes. Now, I love Chekhov as much as the next guy but found that so much energy was spent trying to illuminate simple playwriting techniques hidden in Chekhov's deliberately twisty and opaque writing style. My thought was always, "Isn't there a clearer illustration of these concepts in something more contemporary? Something more straightforward?" I believe students are more willing to engage with texts they're familiar with and my students really seemed to respond well to the more contemporary examples I brought in. Further, I began to see them wrestling with the storytelling values in their own work.

Teaching has been a grand test of my personal value systems. The values haven't changed, necessarily, but my understanding of them has deepened. I've found that some of these values are hard to communicate and this makes me question my own comprehension. For example, I'm fascinated by the concept of time in relation to audience experience in theater. The audience can only experience time moving forward, but the storyteller can manipulate time in any way he chooses. Events can happen out of sequential order; secrets can be exposed early or late in the story. I was so excited to share various time strategies with my students and demonstrate how these strategies can help tell you what kind of story you're telling.

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And yet, when I tried to explore these strategies with my students, I came up short. The concepts made so much sense to me as a student, but I couldn't articulate their effectiveness as an instructor. I wanted so badly to share this knowledge, but I lacked the tools to do it. I found myself speaking in generalities, grasping for examples, stammering and sweating. It's a terrifying feeling, speaking in front of an eager class and coming face-to-face with my own gaps in knowledge. But it also serves as a valuable check-in; a reminder that wrestling with these concepts takes constant rigor. I'm a graduate student. I'm studying these ideas at a high level, but I have not mastered them. It's easy to come up with a list of values, but it's incredibly hard to execute them in my own work or communicate their effectiveness to my students. And I find this exciting. Theater is a pursuit, right? An attempt to pin down a slippery thing and while sometimes I have it in my grasp, often I don't. Teaching has been an exciting way to struggle with and against my core artistic values systems. My classes are carefully structured, planned out and efficient, but it's been important to keep mystery and surprise alive in the room as well.

Teaching is also an exercise in consistency. My first year, I took a pedagogy course with Richard Isackes, a design professor at UT. For one of the exercises, I had to identify what values I associate with a good teacher. And I went back to consistency. I didn't want a teacher who was excited and engaged one day, distant and sullen the next. A teacher, at any level, should be reliable. Student should know what they're getting. Of course, it's hard to be consistent in the roller coaster of graduate school. There are so many ups and

downs, triumphs and failures. It's nearly impossible to stay completely neutral, for lack of a better term. To combat this, I try to check in with myself mentally, before teaching a class. If I'm in a not-so-good mood, fine. That only means that I need to be careful with getting frustrated with the class or saying something I'll regret later. This kind of check-in is useful in all areas of my personal and professional life. It's not about covering for the bad feelings, but rather acknowledging their presence and taking more care in what I say and how I say it. Part of my pursuit at UT has been seeking a consistency in my life, my classwork and my artistic practice. It's one thing to show up to attend or teach a class; it's another thing to be *present* in a class. In my teaching, I'm attempting to give my students the idea of a practice; a method of writing and creating that isn't dependent on pure inspiration or revelation. At the same time, I'm trying to find that consistency in my own work, my own practice, my own process.

SMALL MOMENTS

This Ticket vs. Process idea has shifted my entire perspective on my time at UT. When I came to school, I was focused on the big events. The showcases, the productions, the connections to the professional theater world. And while I've had my share of big moments at UT, it's the small moments that will stick with me. I'll remember the times when I was able to commit to the *experience* of UT instead of the outcome. This is a demanding program. It requires full commitment, a day-to-day investment in the work and the experience. I've been happiest here when I've accepted the process instead of chasing the result.

The single best thing I've written at UT is a short play called *Clown Room*. It's the story of Jessie, a plucky ten year old who's recently been saddled with the evilest of evil stepmothers. Jessie is afraid of clowns and as a way to torture her, the evil stepmother transforms Jessie's bedroom into a terrifying "clown room." The play is about Jesse's attempt to overcome her fear and gain the upper hand on the stepmother. I wrote *Clown Room* near the end of my first year at UT, as part of the first-year playwright's showcase. This showcase is a chance for the first-year MFA Playwriting and Directing students to present short plays for the rest of the department. At the time, this showcase felt like an obligation, more than anything else. The first year is notoriously difficult and by the end, I was running on fumes. I had no expectation of *Clown Room* being anything other than another task I had to complete.

But, then, something funny happened. As I continued work on the play, I fell in love with the world and the characters. There is so much talk about finding your voice as a playwright, and finally, this felt like my voice. *Clown Room* was an illustration of what I liked about stories: dark humor, high stakes, a likable, vulnerable protagonist facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. *Clown Room* showed my classmates what specifically I had to offer to the program and for the first time, I saw what role I could fill in our artistic ecosystem. My plays would be little machines; well crafted, efficiently told stories filled with humor and emotional, spiritual resonance. I remember listening to the play during performance and feeling, for the first time, like I belonged in this program. Ironically, *Clown Room* has emerged as a ticket of sorts, as the play brought me to Aspen and New York City as part of the Theater Masters National MFA Playwrights Festival. But I never thought of the play as a ticket; rather it was a clear representation of my artistic voice.

There is a moment during UTNT that will always stay with me. It comes after the plays are over and we're striking the set. We're almost finished, eating pizza, sitting in the audience, drinking soda. And someone points out that we never took a cohort picture. Every year during UTNT, the playwrights and director take a picture together as a way of commemorating that year's festival. And sitting here, eating our pizza, we remember that we completely forgot to do it. Eva Suter, another MFA Playwright, remembers that she

has sparklers. We run outside, stand in front of the big fountain, light the sparklers. And we take a picture that feels like a family portrait.

I've just been part of a festival with three other plays. In the past, my mind would immediately go to questions of "whose play was the most successful? Did my play measure up?" This harkens back to the feeling described in my opening paragraph: "Oh my God, what if I'm not the best?" And those thoughts are there; sure, they don't just disappear. But the pervading feeling is pride. Pride not just in *Lyla School*, but simply in being part of the festival. All of the plays were good and I'm *glad* they were good. The OVERALL quality of the festival was high and that reflects well on me. I'm not just part of a successful play, but a successful festival, a successful cohort.

NEXT STEPS

So, what next? If I were to make an objective bet on my future, where am I putting my money down? Happiness or fear? Success or failure? Connection or isolation?

The answer, of course, is disappointingly opaque. It will always be a little of both.

Happiness or fear? Well, I know by now that I will probably never be a traditionally “happy” person. I’m not effusive; I’m not an extrovert. My face kind of naturally falls into a frown. But I’m really hoping the fear levels will go down. I want to trust enough in my partners, collaborators, loved ones that I can fail in front of them, come up short and still feel safe. Happiness is forged through process; a day-to-day commitment to productivity and openness. I’ve found that my happiness is connected to my work. I was happy at NTI. I was happy during rehearsals for *Poor Boys’ Chorus* and *Lyla School*. I was happy when I was too busy, too invested to be afraid.

And success? If I were to really try to predict my career, yes, I believe at some point I will find some kind of mainstream acceptance or success. This may come in the form of a big regional or NYC production, a gig writing a film or a TV show, or being part of a successful theater collective. I can also predict that the success probably won’t feel like success. It won’t drive my happiness meter through the roof or finally reassure me that I’ve chosen the right path. Success doesn’t equal happiness. Or rather, I realize I need to decide my own version of success and how that can bring me a version of happiness. In the past, I think I defined success as outward acceptance, confirmation of talent. I was

only going to be successful if someone else told me I was, if I could see it reflected back to me. But in this final year at UT, I've started to see it as something less permanent or tangible. Success is a good rehearsal, a single gasp in the audience, a breakthrough in rewriting. And that outward stuff (financial reward, critical acclaim, mainstream productions) will be a result, not a catalyst. The catalyst has to come from somewhere else. If I keep striving, keep chasing; the results will take care of themselves. My hope is to be so focused on The Process, that when The Ticket is finally cashed in, I might not even notice.

The last question is the scariest and the most uncertain. Connection or isolation? I didn't find my one true love, my life partner in Austin. I didn't find my magic collective, that group of best friends slash lifelong collaborators. I've certainly kept some of my struggles private and hidden. But while I have occasionally *felt* alone at UT, I've never actually *been* alone. I've had people in my corner. I'm grateful for professors who gave their time freely and unconditionally. I've been constantly surprised by the generosity and collaborative spirit of my classmates. Consequently, I've tried to make myself more available as an artistic partner, a sounding board, a mentor. I'm incredibly proud of the work I've made with other artists in this program.

Needing other people costs something. Scrutiny is terrifying. It's a lot safer to be alone. It's difficult to embrace someone else's success, as there's always going to be that voice,

“How come it’s not *my* success?” But I’m beginning to realize that investment in other people is not only a positive life practice, but also a pretty sound business investment. Investing in other people increases my own chance of success; we rise in circles. While I’ve been investigating opportunities for next year, I realize that I am looking for chances to increase scrutiny, invite collaborators into my personal practice and work. I have little interest in finding an isolated residency or holing up by myself in an apartment somewhere. I want to build with other people.

Personal growth is a process. As great as it would be to say, “I came into UT scared and now am leaving happy,” that wouldn’t be the truth. My growth at UT has been incremental, non-linear. There have been a lot of stops and starts. But I’ve achieved moments of joy and clarity. Moments of breakthrough, connection, growth. These moments will fuel me, as I head into the next phase of my professional life. I’m grateful for the struggle, the slivers of triumph, the pain and the unknown.

POOR BOYS' CHORUS

By Brian Kettler

SETTING/TIME

A small town. Summer.

A NOTE ON STAGING

This is a piece that cries out for open space, fluidity and pace. The motion is created through light and sound rather than sets and props. Use as few props as possible. The Poor Boys Chorus can be many things: narrators, guides, observers. They should not however, function as extra stagehands or furniture movers.

CHARACTERS

STEEDS-15. An orphan. Fearful. Claustrophobic. Coming into his own.

ANNABEL-15. Wealthiest girl in town. Confident. Mischievous.

POOR BOYS CHORUS- 3 actors. Teenagers. Male. Fun loving, excitable, they like to roughhouse. They drive the action of the play.

JACKIE-20 Menacing. Funny. Dangerous.

DOREEN-22-Jackie's girlfriend. Tragically kind. Has an edge to her.

BILL THE MAGNIFICENT-Late 20s-30s. Mysterious. Magical. Might be a total charlatan.

POOR BOYS' CHORUS
BY BRIAN KETTLER

Annabel stands on stage. She stares at something or someone. We can't see what it is.

In a different area of the stage, Jackie stands. He stares at Annabel.

A few moments in this.

Steeds enter with the Poor Boys Chorus. They are rambunctious, full of youthful energy. Jackie exits. We see that Annabel is staring at Steeds.

POOR BOY #1
As a general rule.

POOR BOY #2
Closer to law.

POOR BOY #3
The first commandment.

POOR BOY #1
In our town reads.

POOR BOY #2
Poor boys don't talk.

POOR BOY #3
To rich girls.

POOR BOY #1
Everyone knows.

POOR BOY #2
Nobody dares.

POOR BOY #3
You don't cross the line.

POOR BOY #1
But what's the rule?

POOR BOY #2
About rich girls.

POOR BOY #3
Talking to poor boys?

ANNABEL
Hey.
Steeds.

Everyone freezes. Steeds looks to the Poor Boys for help. They all look in different directions, unable or unwilling to assist him. Steeds turns and quickly walks away from Annabel. She follows him around the stage.

ANNABEL
Hey.

Steeds walks faster.

ANNABEL
HEY.

He almost makes it offstage.

ANNABEL
HEY!!!

Steeds stops. He turns around. Very slowly, he walks up to face Annabel.

They stand together close for a few moments. Steeds wills himself to keep eye contact. Annabel is a little unprepared for this closeness. She has to look away.

ANNABEL
Hey.

Steeds says nothing. She glances up to check his expression. A beat. Then she turns on her heels and exits.

Steeds and The Poor Boys Chorus stare after her. A frozen moment of shocked silence. Steeds takes an inhaler out of his pocket, takes a deep pull. The Poor Boys break out of the frozen moment.

POOR BOY #1
And just like that.

POOR BOY #2
The laws of the universe.

POOR BOY #3
Are up for debate.

POOR BOY #1
The apple floats.

POOR BOY #2
Sound beats light.

POOR BOY #3
The earth is flat as a pancake.

POOR BOY #1
It doesn't matter.

POOR BOY #2
What she said.

POOR BOY #3
What matters is.

POOR BOY #1
She said it.

POOR BOY #2
To him.

Steeds stumbles a few steps with a goofy grin on his face.

POOR BOY #1
But let's move now.

POOR BOY #2

To the end of school.

POOR BOY #3

The beginning of summer.

POOR BOY #1

And more important than sunshine.

POOR BOY #2

Or freedom.

POOR BOY #3

Summer brings

ALL POOR BOYS

The carnival.

*The carnival. Rides, games, lights, sound. Garish. Familiar. Comforting. Alive.
Dangerous. Steeds sits down, waiting for a show to begin.*

POOR BOY #1

Paid for in full.

By Annabel's father.

POOR BOY #2

The richest man in town.

POOR BOY #3

The Popcorn Popping

POOR BOY #1

Bright Lights Flashing

POOR BOY #2

Dizzying Rides.

POOR BOY #1

And best of all.

POOR BOY #2

On the 4th of July

POOR BOY #3

A fireworks show.

POOR BOY #1

Like you've never seen.

Beat. They remember the fireworks.

POOR BOY #1

This summer, by far.

The most popular tent.

Is "Bill the Magnificent".

A wooden sign is lowered reading, "Bill the Magnificent".

POOR BOY #2

Master Illusionist.

POOR BOY #1

Expert escapist.

POOR BOY #3

Direct descendent of Harry Houdini.

Pause. The other Poor Boys look at #3, incredulous. #3 shrugs.

POOR BOY #3

Well that's what he told me.

Bill the Magnificent enters. He wheels on a clear cage, with slightly bigger dimensions than his own body. The Poor Boys join Steeds on the ground. Bill takes out handcuffs, leg restraints, a frightening mask with locks. He throws them on the ground.

BILL

And now a volunteer.

Hmmmm, let's see.

How.

About.

(Beat. A single spotlight on Annabel.)

You.

Everyone looks. The Poor Boys and Steeds are shocked to see Annabel at the carnival. She walks to Bill. Bill smiles.

BILL
Hands.

Annabel picks up the handcuffs. Bill puts his hands behind his back. She handcuffs him.

BILL
Legs.

Annabel picks up the leg restrains. She attaches them to his legs. She looks up.

BILL
Face.

Cautiously, Annabel picks up the mask. She looks at it, frightened. A shudder goes through the crowd.

BILL
Come on now.
We haven't got all day.

Slowly, Annabel walks to Bill. She stands on her tiptoes. She puts the mask on him. She gently takes his arm, and leads him to the cage. She opens a small door on the side of the cage. He steps in. She closes the door and steps back. The cage fills with water. As the water rises, the crowd is transfixed. But Bill is not moving. Panic starts to spread. Throughout this, Annabel remains still, silent, watching.

STEEDS
No.
No.
NO!!!!!!!!!!

*Sudden blackout.
One beat.
Two.
Three.
Lights back up.
Bill the Magnificent stands in front of the cage.
The handcuffs and leg restraints are off.
The mask is gone.
Poor Boys and Steeds are frozen exactly in the same positions.
A beat of silence.
Bill takes a deep breath and bows.
Poor Boys and Steeds applaud wildly.*

Annabel stares at Bill.
Bill stares back at her.
He smiles.
The Poor Boys separate from the group.

POOR BOY #1
And after the show.

POOR BOY #2
As Steeds tries to stay.

POOR BOY #3
In the narcotic embrace of escape.

POOR BOY #1
For the second time in history.

POOR BOY #2
A rich girl.

POOR BOY #3
Talks to a poor boy.

ANNABEL
Hey.

POOR BOY #1
One more note.

POOR BOY #2
Steeds is claustrophobic.

POOR BOY #3
And a full-fledged asthmatic.

POOR BOY #1
Steeds arrived premature.

POOR BOY #2
It wasn't so much he wanted out.

POOR BOY #3
He just couldn't stand staying in.

ANNABEL

Hey.

POOR BOY #1

But why bring this up now?

POOR BOY #2

Claustrophobia.

POOR BOY #3

Fear of enclosed space.

POOR BOY #2

Well, let me ask you something.

POOR BOY #3

Have you ever been in love?

ANNABEL

HEY!

Steeds turns, surprised to see Annabel.

ANNABEL

You deaf?

STEEDS

No.

ANNABEL

Good show.

STEEDS

The best.

ANNABEL

It's getting late.

Going home?

STEEDS

Soon.

ANNABEL

I bet the Ferris Wheel does one more turn.
You wanta go on it with me?

Pause. Not just any pause. Total and utter silence. The world stops. The Poor Boys Chorus is shocked. They turn to Steeds. They want to speak for him. They can't. More silence.

STEEDS

Yes.

She casually grabs his hand. A Ferris Wheel car. Annabel opens the latch. Steeds sits. Annabel sits. The sound of the Ferris Wheel starting up. A long pause. The Poor Boys watch them, silent tension builds.

POOR BOY #1

Please.

POOR BOY #2

Somebody.

POOR BOY #3

Speak.

ANNABEL

Is it ever fun
Being an orphan?

STEEDS

Fun?

ANNABEL

No one telling you what to do.
(Beat.)
I used to pretend my parents were dead.
When I was little.
When I got mad at them.

STEEDS

Oh.

ANNABEL

They didn't die though.

STEEDS
That's good

ANNABEL
Uh-huh.

Beat.

ANNABEL
You don't talk too much.

STEEDS
No.
(Beat.)
They thought something was wrong.
When I was a baby.
They brought me to a doctor.

ANNABEL
And?

Steeds shrugs.

STEEDS
Turns out I just didn't have much to say.

Annabel smiles.

ANNABEL
They used to call your dad
Jack the Bear.

STEEDS
Uh-huh.

ANNABEL
Why did they call him that?

STEEDS
I don't know.

ANNABEL

What was he like?

STEEDS

I don't remember.

ANNABEL

When he died.

My father said:

"Jack the Bear.

He was a great man."

I remember that.

STEEDS

He wasn't.

ANNABEL

What?

STEEDS

Great.

Not like your father.

ANNABEL

Oh, my father's not so great.

Steeds doesn't respond.

ANNABEL

Everyone thinks he is.

It's kind of a trick.

(Beat.)

He comes home late sometimes.

(Beat.)

Like my mother's in bed.

Fast asleep.

And my father comes home late.

(Beat.)

I followed him once.

STEEDS

Oh.

ANNABEL

I shouldn't be telling you this.

STEEDS

No.

ANNABEL

I have a hard time shutting up sometimes.

Steeds shrugs.

ANNABEL

If I talk too much.

Or I'm getting off track.

You just say, "stop".

Okay?

And I'll stop.

STEEDS

Let's talk about something else.

ANNABEL

Like what?

STEEDS

Anything.

ANNABEL

No.

Too bad.

STEEEDS

What?

ANNABEL

Ride's over.

The Ferris Wheel stops. Annabel gets out. She holds the door open for him. He gets out. They face each other.

ANNABEL

How come you don't like me?

Beat. Steeds looks down.

ANNABEL

I've been trying to talk to you.
You won't even look.

No response. Annabel grins.

ANNABEL

You must be in love with me

STEEDS

No!

ANNABEL

Don't worry.
It happens
All the time.

STEEDS

Yeah, right.

Beat.

ANNABEL

You know your brother stares at me?

Beat.

ANNABEL

I have these wild dreams.
Nightmares.
He's staring at me like a wolf.
But then I wake up.
And he's still staring.
(*Beat.*)
I used to come over
In secret.
Remember?

STEEDS

Hey, can I walk you home?

Beat.

ANNABEL

I'm not even s'posed to be talking to you.

STEEDS

I know.

Beat.

STEEDS

Um-

ANNABEL

I'm sticking around.

STEEDS

Everything's closed.

ANNABEL

I have some business.

STEEDS

What kinda business?

ANNABEL

Personal.

Secret

STEEDS

Right.

Sorry.

He turns away quickly. Annabel considers him.

ANNABEL

Hey, Steeds.

He turns back.

ANNABEL

Meet me tomorrow?

STEEDS

Where?

ANNABEL

Bridge by the creek.

Midnight.

You'll come?

STEEDS

Yes.

Steeds nods. He exits. Annabel watches him go. When he is safely gone, she begins to walk in the opposite direction. Poor Boys watch for a moment and then follow Steeds off.

Annabel approaches Bill's tent. Bill is closing up for the night.

ANNABEL

How did you do it?

Bill doesn't answer. He continues to close up.

ANNABEL

The drowning trick.

Hey!

I'm talking to you.

BILL

Show's over, sweetheart.

ANNABEL

But-

BILL

Come back tomorrow.

Two shows tomorrow.

ANNABEL

You can't speak to me like that.

BILL

Can't I?

Bill stops moving for the first time. He stares at her. Annabel fidgets.

ANNABEL
My father owns this carnival.

BILL
Ah.

ANNABEL
They used to crown me queen.
When I was a kid.
On the Fourth of July.

BILL
Congratulations.
(*A mocking bow*)
Your majesty.

ANNABEL
No.
I haven't been queen
For a very long time.
(*Beat.*)
Everyone thought you were gonna drown tonight.

BILL
And what about you?

ANNABEL
I'm way smarter than that.

BILL
Well, if you're so smart.
Let me enlighten you.
Your father may own this carnival.
The rides, the games.
But he certainly does not own me.

ANNABEL
Where do you live?

BILL
Town to town.

ANNABEL
Nowhere.

BILL
Everywhere.

ANNABEL
Must get lonely.

BILL
The most valuable skill.
Is the art of escape.
Do you know why?

Annabel shakes her head.

BILL
If you can master escape.
It doesn't matter.
Where you are.
Or what's holding you down.
There's always a way.
To weasel out.
Now is that something that interests you?

ANNABEL
It's a good trick.
I can figure out how you did it.

BILL
Wanna bet?

Bill goes into the tent. He comes out with a pad of paper and a pen. He tears out a piece and hands it to Annabel.

BILL
Draw me something.

ANNABEL
What?

BILL
Anything.

Bill turns his back to her. Annabel looks at him strangely. She quickly scribbles something.

ANNABEL
Done.

BILL
Fold it in half.
Put it in your pocket.

Annabel does this. Bill turns around. He stares at her, smiling slightly.

Bill starts to scribble on the pad as he talks.

BILL
The drowning trick,
Is near impossible.
It requires intense focus.
Impeccable form.
And just a little.
Something.
Extra.

ANNABEL
Extra?

BILL
I could teach you.

ANNABEL
It's not really dangerous, is it?

Bill finishes drawing. He hands it to Annabel. She looks at it. She is surprised. Shocked, actually. She looks up at Bill. "How did you do that?" Bill exits.

Steeds with the Poor Boys outside of his house. He takes a pull off of the inhaler. Steeds enters. Poor Boys watch. Jackie and Doreen are playing dominos, drinking whiskey. Doreen wears a silk dress. Steeds tries to sneak past.

JACKIE
Home late.

STEEDS

Uh-huh.

Sorry.

JACKIE

Damn late.

STEEDS

Just

The carnival.

Jackie plays a domino. He turns to look at Steeds.

JACKIE

All the poor boys go to the carnival!

DOREEN

Jackie.

STEEDS

It's just.

I like it.

JACKIE

Uh-huh, Yeah, I used to like it too.

You're not going to say hi to Doreen?

DOREEN

Hi, little Steeds.

STEEDS

Hi Doreen.

DOREEN

You know what?

You're getting pretty handsome.

You're looking pretty good.

JACKIE

You don't have to lie to him.

DOREEN

Mean.

JACKIE

Little runt.

(He snaps.)

Hey!

She gave you a compliment.

You're not gonna say thanks?

STEEDS

Sorry.

JACKIE

(To Doreen) I try to teach him manners.

STEEDS

Thanks Doreen.

You look good.

JACKIE

(Wolfish grin) Good enough to eat.

DOREEN

Shut *up*.

STEEDS

Is that a new dress?

Pause. Something changes in the room. Doreen smiles, smoothes out her dress.

DOREEN

Yes in fact.

It is.

STEEDS

S' nice.

JACKIE

Ask where she got it.

(Beat.)

Ask *how* she got it.

Pause.

DOREEN
Steeds, it's silk.
See, it's real nice.
You want to feel?

JACKIE
Silk my ass.
Ask who gave it to her.

DOREEN
It *is*.

JACKIE
He's not giving you real silk.
Dumbest girl in this whole dumb town.
First Prize!

DOREEN
I'm leaving now.

JACKIE
Congratulations!

DOREEN
(*Mumbles*) Talk to me like that.

JACKIE
Why don't you go on and leave then?

Pause. Doreen looks down, gulps her whiskey. Jackie grins again. He turns to Steeds.

JACKIE
Come on over here and feel her dress.
You be the judge.
Silk or no.

Steeds doesn't answer.

JACKIE
C'mon now.
Judge and jury.
I said c'mere.

DOREEN

Jackie, let's just play.

JACKIE

Don't make me say it again.

Pause. Steeds walks over to Doreen, who is just as uncomfortable as he is. He waits.

JACKIE

Go on.

Tentatively, Steeds feels the dress.

JACKIE

Feel like silk?

STEEDS

I don't know.

JACKIE

Get a little closer.

Suddenly, Jackie grabs Steeds' hand and makes him touch Doreen's breast.

DOREEN

Jackie!

JACKIE

That feel like silk?

HA HA HA.

STEEDS

I'm sorry, I'm-!

Steeds tries to free himself. He wrestles against Jackie. Jackie pushes him roughly to the ground. He stands over him, puts his foot on Steeds' chest. Jackie speaks to Doreen while staring at Steeds.

JACKIE

When we were little.

Well he was little, I was big.

And Jack the Bear was still alive.

He let me take Steeds out into the water.

I told Steeds I got you, the whole time.
Hold my hand and I got you.
(Jackie starts laughing.)
That's what brothers do.
(Beat.)
And he's so scared.
Remember, Steeds?

STEEDS
(Quietly) I didn't want to go.

JACKIE
What?

STEEDS
I didn't want to swim.
It was too deep.

JACKIE
Waddaya mean, too deep?
(Beat.)
He told me to.
He let me take you.
It wasn't too god damn deep.

Pause. Jackie continues the story. Tries to grin.

JACKIE
Anyway.
Soon as we get out there.
Outta nowhere!
He starts thrashin' around, tryin' to go under.
Swear to God.
You were *tryin'* to get yourself killed.
You were tryin' to drown us.
All I said was hold my hand.
But you tried to take me down with you.
(Pause. Jackie shakes his head.)
All cuz you panicked
Cuz you got too much coward in you.
Cuz you don't know how to fight.

Beat. Jackie turns to Doreen.

JACKIE

Let's go.

DOREEN

I just need to freshen up.

JACKIE

You're fresh enough.

Jackie exits. Doreen sits frozen for a moment. She walks by Steeds, stops for a moment, then continues off. Steeds lies on his back, closes his eyes. Poor Boys enter, The lie down next to him, like a sleepover.

POOR BOY #1

That night, Steeds dreams of enclosure.

POOR BOY #2

Jackie's eyes, Doreen's lips, the moment when he turned back.

POOR BOY #3

At the carnival.

And through it all, Bill the Magnificent.

POOR BOY #1

Laughing.

POOR BOY #2

Mocking him.

POOR BOY #3

Pretending to drown.

Steeds and the Poor Boy wake up.

POOR BOY #1

And when he awakes, things like.

POOR BOY #2

Love.

POOR BOY #3

Warmth.

POOR BOY #1

Happiness.

POOR BOY #2

All those things are far away.

POOR BOY #3

And very foolish.

POOR BOY #1

Open whiskey bottles.

POOR BOY #2

Sour beer.

POOR BOY #3

The stench is everywhere.

This is his world.

POOR BOY #1

Jackie gone.

POOR BOY #3

Doreen too.

POOR BOY #2

Small miracles.

POOR BOY #1

Remembers his meeting.

POOR BOY #3

With Annabel

POOR BOY #2

A world away.

POOR BOY #3

Fever dream.

POOR BOY #1

And Bill the Magnificent.

POOR BOY #2
Smiling through.

POOR BOY #3
Large and looming.

POOR BOY #1
Bad thoughts spinning.

POOR BOY #2
Between his ears.

POOR BOY #3
What would he say?

POOR BOY #2
Caught in his throat.

POOR BOY #1
Clogging his heart.

POOR BOY #2
Rich girls don't talk.

POOR BOY #2
To poor boys.
Unless.

POOR BOY #3
Unless?

POOR BOY #1
Unless they have a good reason.

The creek. Lights up on Annabel, floating on a makeshift raft. Steeds crosses to her. The Poor Boys follow. She looks up at him. Steeds walks to her.

ANNABEL
Come on.
Get in.

STEEDS

Um.

ANNABEL
We'll float.

STEEDS
I don't like the water.

ANNABEL
Steeds.
You can't be afraid of things.
(Annabel shrugs.)
I'm not.

Beat. Steeds doesn't move.

ANNABEL
All right.
Go home, then.

STEEDS
NO!

ANNABEL
S'not not even deep.

Cautiously, Steeds steps onto the raft. He sits next to her, uncomfortable. They listen together to the sounds of the night. Annabel takes out a flask. She drinks. She offers it to Steeds.

STEEDS
Where did you get that?

ANNABEL
My father.
I stole it.
Really good.
(Tiny beat.)
Or old.
Something like that.
(She rears back)
I'll push you off.

STEEDS

Don't.

ANNABEL

You're really that scared?

STEEDS

I almost drowned once.

ANNABEL

Yeah.

I know.

Pause. Annabel sips from the flask. A long pause.

STEEDS

What are you thinking about?

ANNABEL

Escape.

What about you?

STEEDS

The opposite.

(Beat.)

Hey, can I ask you something?

Annabel shrugs.

STEEDS

What happened?

(Beat.)

With you and Jackie.

Beat. Annabel looks away.

STEEDS

You'd come around

After Jack the Bear died.

You'd talk to Jackie.

But then,

You stopped.

(Beat.)

And the carnival.
They used to crown you queen.
Every Fourth of July.
And now they don't.

ANNABEL
Steeds-

STEEDS
They don't do that anymore.
You're not even allowed to go.

ANNABEL
I'm allowed.

STEEDS
Well, you're not.
Supposed to.

ANNABEL
Nobody tells me what to do.
Where to go.
You understand?

STEEDS
Um, okay.

ANNABEL
We could go there right now.
C'mon.

STEEDS
S'closed.
Lights are off.

ANNABEL
Nope.

STEEDS
Rides are dead for the night.

ANNABEL
Not all of them.

STEEDS

Liar.

ANNABEL

Cross my heart.

STEEDS

Bet you a dollar you're lying.

ANNABEL

Bet you five I'm not.

They vigorously shake hands. Annabel steps out of the raft.

ANNABEL

You coming or what?

STEEDS

C'mon, joke's over.

ANNABEL

I'm telling you.

I can get us in.

Here.

She reaches out her hand. Steeds doesn't move. She moves her hands to her hips.

ANNABEL

First you're scared of the water.

Now you won't get out of it.

How am I supposed to keep you straight?

Steeds gets out of the raft himself, refusing her help.

STEEDS

I gotta go home.

ANNABEL

Not there!

No.

STEEDS

See you tomorrow.

ANNABEL
Anywhere but home!

Steeds starts to exit. He turns back to her.

STEEDS
If Jackie comes back.
And I'm not there.
You gotta understand.

ANNABEL
What?

STEEDS
It's trouble.

ANNABEL
So?
Who cares?
I'm always in trouble.

Steeds scoffs, shakes his head. Starts to exit.

ANNABEL
You're laughing at me.

STEEDS
Tomorrow, okay?

ANNABEL
What's so god damn funny?

He takes a pull from the inhaler. He looks hard at her.

STEEDS
Your kinda trouble.
And my kinda trouble.
Are two very different things.

Annabel walks to him.

ANNABEL

There's a ride going.

Promise.

A light is on.

Don't you want to see?

I know where to look.

From the other side of the stage, we hear Bill's voice.

BILL

I'm riding sidesaddle.

One leg off.

An old rusted bicycle.

Just like this.

Lights up on Bill's tent. Annabel and Steeds cross to the tent. Bill takes the whiskey from Annabel. He demonstrates riding the bicycle as Annabel and Steeds sit, listening to the story.

BILL

Trying to impress

Marlo Fitzgerald.

Every day, I ride past her house.

After school.

One leg off.

One hand on the bars.

And with the other hand, I'm

Juggling!

Okay?

(Pause for effect)

Like this,

(He demonstrates riding and juggling)

Can you imagine?

Right around your age.

An amateur clown.

I must have been crazy.

But I do this for three weeks.

Knowing that one day

She'll have to come out.

First week.

Nothing.

Second week.

Nothing.

Third week.
Not a peep.
Until the last day...
(Beat.)
The last day...

Bill hops over to the table and takes a swig of whiskey.

ANNABEL
She came out?

BILL
I got hit by a truck.
(He stops hopping. Smiles.)
Full body cast.
Thirteen months.
Turns out Marlo Fitzgerald had choir practice every day after school.
So it was more or less.
An exercise in futility.
But ask me if it was worth it.

Annabel and Steeds look at each other. Bill sits down, takes another swig of whiskey.

BILL
Three lessons gleaned.
First of all and chiefly important.
Falling in love will damage your internal organs.
No exceptions.
No relief.
You understand?

Steeds nods vigorously.

BILL
Secondly.
The doctors said I would never walk again.
(He stands up again. He promenades around.)
Steeds.
Look.
What am I doing?

STEEDS
You're walking.

BILL
What?
I'm...?

STEEDS
(A little drunk)
You're walking!
Dancing!

Bill sits back down.

BILL
There is no match.
For intestinal fortitude.
(Bill slaps his stomach, hard.)
Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.
(Beat. Bill holds up three fingers.)
Thirteen months in bed became a period of intense focus.
Dedication.
A singular pursuit of supernatural proficiency.
(He takes another drink.)
Soon as I could walk again, I ran.
Dropped out of school.
Joined my first traveling show.
And the name of Marlo Fitzgerald left my lips.
Never to return.

Bill shakes his head, smiling.

STEEDS
Hey can you teach me?
One of your tricks?

Beat. Bill glares at Steeds, who knows he has made a mistake. Annabel groans.

STEEDS
Never mind.

BILL
No that's good.
Sure, boy.
I can give you a little book.

That's how I learned.

STEEDS

Oh.

Um.

Really?

ANNABEL

(Head in her hands)

Steeds, shut up.

STEEDS

What?

BILL

This your little boyfriend?

STEEDS

NO!

BILL

Little lover.

ANNABEL

No.

Just.

He wanted to-

BILL

Maybe it's time you kids ran along.

(Holds up the flask) Thanks for this.

ANNABEL

Bill

Come on.

(Small Beat.)

Please.

Beat

BILL

You want to see something?

Annabel and Steeds nod vigorously. Bill takes a fork out of his back pocket.

BILL

This is called Showing the Fork.
It is a tremendous mental strain.
Showing the fork gives me migraines for a week.

Beat. Bill sighs. He hands the fork to Steeds.

STEEDS

You're not gonna stab me, right?

BILL

Hold this.

Slowly, Steeds takes the fork. Annabel sits down. Steeds stands completely still, holding the fork. Bill takes about ten paces backwards. Steeds looks to Annabel. She shrugs.

BILL

Watch very carefully.

STEEDS

This is safe.
It's just a trick.

BILL

I never said safe.
(Bill turns to Annabel.)
I never said safe.

Bill stops, daring Steeds to drop the fork. He doesn't. He holds it away from his body. He screws his eyes shut.

Bill concentrates on the fork. Bill clenches, his body twitches. Very slowly, the fork begins to bend.

ANNABEL

Steeds look!

Steeds opens his eyes. He sees the bent fork. He drops it in shock. The fork clangs to the ground. A frozen moment.

Bill clutches his head, exits. Slowly, Steeds walks to the fork, now totally bent. He picks it up. He studies it in his hand. Annabel approaches.

ANNABEL

Tonight's lucky, you know?

STEEDS

Why?

ANNABEL

Tonight you get to walk me home.

Outside Annabel's house. It's more a mansion, really. Jackie enters first. He walks up slowly to the house. Looks at it.

Doreen enters, trailing. Maybe a little stumble. She drinks out of a whiskey bottle.

DOREEN

Jackie, c'mon what are we doing?

Jackie doesn't respond, keeps staring at the house. Doreen realizes where they are. A few beats of silence.

DOREEN

We shouldn't be here.

(Beat.)

I don't want to-

JACKIE

How many rooms you think they got in there?

Beat. Doreen walks up to join him.

DOREEN

I dunno.

A hundred?

JACKIE

They probably never set foot in half of them.

DOREEN

Maybe someday-

JACKIE
God damn waste.

DOREEN
Maybe someday you'll buy me a place like this.

JACKIE
Yeah, maybe.

They look at the house in silence. Doreen takes a small sip of the whiskey. Jackie speaks without looking at Doreen.

JACKIE
She's been looking at him.

DOREEN
Who?

JACKIE
The girl.
She stares at Steeds.

DOREEN
So what?

Beat.

DOREEN
(*Shrugs*) Maybe she likes him or something.

Jackie nods, continues to stare up at the house. He turns to Doreen.

JACKIE
We got any left?

DOREEN
Um...

JACKIE
Give it to me.

Doreen passes him the bottle. He brings it to his lips. Empty. He looks at Doreen.

DOREEN
What?

JACKIE
You're sick.
You know that?
You got a real sickness.

DOREEN
No, wait now.
You drank just as much.

JACKIE
Oh, real funny.

DOREEN
That was half and half.
Even split.

JACKIE
Don't lie.

DOREEN
I'm *not*...

Doreen stops. Nods. They continue looking at the house.

JACKIE
He ever let you inside?

Beat. Doreen shrugs.

JACKIE
Pathetic.

DOREEN
He's got a family.

JACKIE
You're like
His pet.

DOREEN

So what?

(Beat.)

Does it make you mad?

JACKIE

No.

DOREEN

You turning red?

You burning up?

JACKIE

I just feel bad for you, Doreen.

DOREEN

Then tell me to stop.

*Beat. Jackie walks a few steps away, tries to get some last drops out of the bottle.
Doreen continues staring at the house.*

DOREEN

He likes me outside.

Not in the house.

(Beat.)

In the woods.

The dirt.

In the dark.

I know how he likes me

JACKIE

Quit it, all right?

Doreen sidles up closer to him.

DOREEN

Tell me to stop.

I want you

To tell me to stop.

JACKIE

Someone's coming.

Doreen stops. She peers off in the distance.

JACKIE

Let's go.

DOREEN

Wait a second.

JACKIE

C'mon Doreen.

DOREEN

Is that...?

Annabel walks with Steeds, approaching her house. Jackie yanks Doreen into a dark corner of the stage.

POOR BOY #1

As he walks her home.

POOR BOY #2

Steeds is determined.

POOR BOY #3

To keep the night intact.

POOR BOY #1

So he fixes his eyes.

POOR BOY #2

On a few poor stars.

POOR BOY #3

Hanging in the sky.

ANNABEL

Why are you so quiet?

STEEDS

I don't know.

POOR BOY #1

He's thinking, in fact.

POOR BOY #2
This is not the time.

POOR BOY #3
For a leap of faith

ANNABEL
Almost there.

STEEDS
Uh-huh.

ANNABEL
You tired or something?

STEEDS
No.

POOR BOY #1
He jams his fists.

POOR BOY #3
Deep in his pockets.

POOR BOY #2
As far as they go.

ANNABEL
Nice night.

STEEDS
S'okay.

POOR BOY #1
He slows down his heart.

POOR BOY #2
Remembers to breathe.

POOR BOY #3
He tries to blink.

STEEDS

Good night, Annabel.

POOR BOY #1
Limbs gone numb.

POOR BOY #2
Sweat pouring down.

POOR BOY #3
Turn around and go.

ANNABEL
Good night, Steeds.

POOR BOY #1
Certain that this.

POOR BOY #2
Is not the time.

POOR BOY #3
For a leap of faith.

Steeds doesn't move.

Switch to Jackie and Doreen.

DOREEN
She's gonna kiss him.
Little Steeds.
Falling in love.

She checks for a reaction from Jackie. He continues to stare, coldly.

DOREEN
Can't you be happy?
Don't you have one nice bone?
(*She shakes her head.*)
He's your blood, for Christ's sake.

JACKIE
He's dead.

DOREEN
Jackie c'mon.

JACKIE
We're going.

DOREEN
What's the big rush?

JACKIE
I'm gonna beat him home.

Jackie exits, with Doreen trailing after him.

Switch back to Annabel and Steeds.

ANNABEL
You gonna be okay?

STEEDS
Sure.

Steeds starts to exit.

ANNABEL
What's your brother gonna do?
If he catches you out late like this.

STEEDS
I don't care.

ANNABEL
You don't have to be brave for me.

STEEDS
It's not
That.
I'm not
Brave.
It's just
Worth it.

ANNABEL

What's he gonna do?

STEEDS

Don't-

ANNABEL

What's gonna happen to you?

Beat. Steeds tries to smile weakly. He shrugs. There is so much sadness in this. Steeds nods, turns away. Starts to go. Annabel waits a beat, and then grabs him. She hugs him tight. A moment in this. Steeds puts his head on her shoulder.

ANNABEL

Do me a favor, okay?

STEEDS

Sure.

Beat. Steeds burrows deeper into her shoulder. She whispers this next line to him.

ANNABEL

When you're down.

When you're really down.

Think of me.

They continue their embrace. Annabel breaks, exits. Steeds backs off, in a daze.

Poor Boys lift Steeds onto their shoulders. They carry him to his house. They watch as Steeds enters.

Jackie is waiting for Steeds. He stands next to a wooden box, with dimensions only slightly larger than Steeds.

JACKIE

Go on.

STEEDS

No.

Please.

Not tonight.

JACKIE

Get in.

STEEDS

Please.

Pause. Slowly, Steeds takes his inhaler out of his pocket. He walks over to the box. Jackie opens the lid. Steeds takes one deep pull. He climbs into the box. Jackie closes the box, knocks on the top once.

JACKIE

Sweet dreams.

Jackie exits. The box alone onstage. The Poor Boys watch. They want to help. They cannot.

Steeds, inside the box, pulls furiously on his inhaler. A good long chunk of silence before the Poor Boys speak.

POOR BOY #1

Jackie's favorite punishment.

POOR BOY #2

The claustrophobic's nightmare

POOR BOY #3

Lack of oxygen.

POOR BOY #1

Small light laughing.

POOR BOY #2

One tiny hole.

POOR BOY #3

Steeds couldn't remember.

POOR BOY #1

The exact origins of this

POOR BOY #2

Cruel ritual.

POOR BOY #3

But as punishment

POOR BOY #1
It's effectiveness

POOR BOY #2
Was unmatched

POOR BOY #3
The night endless.

POR BOY #1
Stretched out before hm.

POOR BOY #2
The hopeless dark holding

POOR BOY #3
The dreadful weight.

POOR BOY #1
Of a hopeless life

POOR BOY #2
But this time

POOR BOY #3
Something was

POOR BOY #1
Different.
In the dark

POOR BOY #2
He felt

POOR BOY #3
Some light.
And in that light

POOR BOY #1
He was

POOR BOY #2

Protected.

POOR BOY #3

What had she said?

POOR BOY #1

When you're down.

POOR BOY #2

When you're really down.

POOR BOY #3

Think of me.

(Beat.)

Night turns into day.

POOR BOY #1

Jackie awakes.

Approaches the box.

POOR BOY #2

Swelling with pride.

POOR BOY #3

Admiring his work.

Jackie approaches the box. He grins. He opens the top, slowly. Pause. Nothing happens. Steeds sits up. He breathes deeply.

POOR BOY #1

And as Steeds re-enters

POOR BOY #2

The world of the living.

POOR BOY #3

Moments come back.

POOR BOY #1

All in one rush.

POOR BOY #3

But not the box.

POOR BOY #1

Not the dark.

POOR BOY #2

Not the desperate breath.

POOR BOY #1

He remembers instead.

POOR BOY #3

The moments intact.

POOR BOY #2

Poor stars in the sky.

POOR BOY #1

What she whispered.

And with this

POOR BOY #2

In

POOR BOY #3

His.

POOR BOY #1

Mind.

POOR BOY #2

He does something.

POOR BOY #3

So stupid.

POOR BOY #1

Foolish.

POOR BOY #2

Brave.

POOR BOY #3

It must have come straight from.

POOR BOY #1
Reserves untapped.

POOR BOY #2
He turns to his brother.
Takes in a breath.

POOR BOY #3
Tastes the air.

Small beat. Suspense.

POOR BOY #1
And he smiles

*Steeds smiles. Jackie does not know what to do with this. A standoff. Jackie exits.
Steeds watches him go.*

Day passes into night.

Annabel approaches Bill's tent. Bill emerges, eating an apple.

BILL
Where's your pal?

ANNABEL
Just me.

BILL
Uh-huh.

Bill takes a bite.

ANNABEL
You gonna invite me in?

BILL
I don't know.

ANNABEL
C'mon Bill.

BILL
No.
The Magnificent.

ANNABEL
What?

BILL
I'd prefer you call me.
Bill the Magnificent.

Bill holds the apple out to Annabel.

BILL
Have a bite.

ANNABEL
Invite me in.

BILL
What, are you a vampire?

ANNABEL
It's cold, god damn it.

BILL
Annabel.
Are we still on?

Beat. Annabel glares at Bill.

BILL
The drowning trick?

Beat.

BILL
Because I don't have a lot of use.
For scared little boys.

ANNABEL
Bill.

BILL

I picked *you*, Annabel.

(Beat.)

But if you don't want to come here...

ANNABEL

He's-

BILL

No one is forcing you.

ANNABEL

He's just

My friend.

Beat. Bill walks closer to Annabel.

BILL

May I offer a small piece of advice?

ANNABEL

Do I have a choice?

Bill grins.

BILL

Fear is a powerful property.

If you let fearful people into your life.

They will weigh you down.

Like a pocket full of rocks.

Beat. Bill leans forward.

BILL

You get me?

Annabel?

ANNABEL

I get you.

Now let me in.

BILL

Somehow not swayed.

ANNABEL
The drowning trick.

BILL
You're not ready.

ANNABEL
Sure I am.

BILL
(Hands on hips. Making fun of her pluckiness.) Sure I am!
Tell you what.
You let an ounce of fear creep into this.
You'll lose your goddamn breath.

ANNABEL
I'm not gonna lose my-

BILL
Listen.
To.
Me.

Beat Annabel sighs, frustrated.

BILL
Do you know what drowning feels like?
Have you even thought about it?

Annabel shrugs. Bill smiles cruelly. Slowly, he puts his hands around his own throat. He stares hard at Annabel. After a few moments, she mirrors him, puts her hands to her throat. Bill nods. He watches her. Suddenly, he reaches out and grips her throat.

BILL
Drowning.
Is.
Death
Literally.
Choking.
The life.
Out of you.
(Beat. Bill releases her. Annabel chokes out air.)

It is not to be taken lightly.

ANNABEL

But you don't drown.

You escape.

BILL

No.

See.

Escape is the last step

ANNABEL

Then, what's the first?

BILL

Acceptance.

Beat.

BILL

That first night.

You thought I was going under.

ANNABEL

No, everyone else-

BILL

You thought I was going to drown.

(Beat.)

And do you know why that is?

(Beat.)

Because I did.

I went.

Under.

The light.

Left

(Bill shrugs.)

And then I escaped.

Beat. Annabel steps to Bill.

ANNABEL

I came here, didn't I?

Alone.
Now, I want to do the drowning trick.
And right now
It's not fear holding me back.
It's your fat ass blocking the door.

Beat. Bill likes this very much. He steps aside. He motions for Annabel to enter. She steps into the tent

Poor Boys and Steeds. Cheerful energy.

POOR BOY #1
Steeds now, cheeks flush.

POOR BOY #2
Pounding down pavement.

POOR BOY #3
Hot in pursuit.

POOR BOY #1
He tries her house.
Rocks in hand.
A reckless attempt.

Steeds throws rocks at Annabel's window. No response.

POOR BOY #1
The wind rising now.

POOR BOY #2
Coaxing him towards.

POOR BOY #3
The edge of the midway.

The sounds of the carnival. Steeds takes it in. He walks purposefully.

POOR BOY #1
And through the lights.
He looks for a tent.

POOR BOY #2

Tucked away.

POOR BOY #3

In the corner of darkness.

Steeds approaches Bill the Magnificent's tent. It is closed up. He investigates. He looks inside. He stops. He looks back to the chorus. He looks back at the tent.

POOR BOY #2

A strange

POOR BOY #3

Thought

POOR BOY #1

Hardens in the back of his mind.

POOR BOY #2

The reddest part of his soul tells him to

ALL

Turn back.

POOR BOY #3

He'll see her tomorrow.

Steeds starts to exit. The Chorus stays where they are. Steeds walks back to the tent.

POOR BOY #1

But the wind whips hard.

POOR BOY #2

The moon hangs high.

POOR BOY #3

Full.

POOR BOY #1

Jaundiced.

POOR BOY #2

And Steeds creeps past the point of no return.

POOR BOY #1
With expert stealth.

POOR BOY #2
He finds an opening.

POOR BOY #3
Ducks down into night.

POOR BOY #1
Feeling her presence.

POOR BOY #2
Heart rising fast.

POOR BOY #3
Goose pimples popping.

POOR BOY #1
Could turn back around.
There's still time.

POOR BOY #2
But his legs are cement.

POOR BOY #3
Like running in a dream.

POOR BOY #1
Strangeness spreading.

POOR BOY #2
Head so heavy.

POOR BOY #3
Light pricking his eyes.

POOR BOY #1
Forcing himself.

ALL
To look.

POOR BOY #3
If he just turned back.

POOR BOY #2
If he got up and ran.

POOR BOY #1
Feeling the wind.

POOR BOY #3
Blood running cold.

Beat. Chorus walks to Steeds. They look with him.

POOR BOY #2
But Steeds is a Poor Boy.

POOR BOY #1
And they just can't help themselves.

POOR BOY #3
Poor Boys have to look.

Steeds looks through an opening in the tent. Music comes up. In the tent, Bill stands, watching intently. Annabel performs the drowning trick. Steeds gasps, we hear the air sucking violently into his lungs.

BLACKOUT

*A shift here.
Not necessarily an Act Break, certainly not an intermission.
Just, you know, a shift.*

Time passes. It's the day before the 4th of July.

Twilight. The creek. Steeds sits, watching the water. The Poor Boys lounge. Steeds takes a pull from his inhaler. Annabel enters. Steeds sees her, then looks away.

ANNABEL
I been looking for you.
(*Beat. No response.*)
Where have you been?

STEEDS
Around.

ANNABEL
Oh.

Beat. Annabel sits down next to Steeds.

ANNABEL
Hey, why do you need that thing?

STEEDS
To breathe.

ANNABEL
What happens if you don't have it?

STEEDS
I could die.

Annabel chuckles to herself.

STEEDS
What?

ANNABEL
You're always gonna die.
The water.
Breathing.
Is there anything that doesn't kill you?
Ha ha ha.

STEEDS
Shut up.

ANNABEL
Everyone knows how to breathe.
You just...
(She takes some deep breaths.) Huuuh. Huuuh. Huuuh.
It's easy.

Steeds stands up.

ANNABEL

I was just playing around.

STEEDS

Real funny.

Beat.

ANNABEL

You going to watch the fireworks tomorrow?

Steeds shrugs.

ANNABEL

I was thinking.

If you want.

We could watch 'em together.

STEEDS

I don't know.

ANNABEL

You don't like me anymore?

STEEDS

I don't want you to get in trouble.

ANNABEL

C'mon.

You don't even have to talk really.

We can just

Look up together

Annabel tries to get a smile out of Steeds. He walks towards the water. Annabel eyeballs him.

ANNABEL

What was it like?

When you almost drowned?

What did it feel like?

Steeds doesn't turn back.

ANNABEL

Did it feel like Death choking the life out of you?

STEEDS

What?

ANNABEL

I don't know.

STEEDS

That's the stupidest thing I ever heard.

ANNABEL

What it did feel like then?

No response.

ANNABEL

Steeds.

Steeds walks to the very edge of the water. Looks down into it.

STEEDS

It didn't feel like anything.

(Beat.)

It felt like running out of space.

Beat.

ANNABEL

You gonna jump in?

STEEDS

Maybe.

(Steeds looks down into the water.)

S'not even deep.

ANNABEL

Deep enough.

Come back and sit down.

STEEDS

You dare me?

ANNABEL
What?

STEEDS
You dare me to jump?

ANNABEL
This is stupid.

STEEDS
You think I won't do it.

ANNABEL
You don't know how to swim.

STEEDS
I'll learn.
Bet me five.

ANNABEL
Steeds.

STEEDS
One
Two.
Three.

ANNABEL
HEY!

Annabel grabs Steeds before he can jump in. They stay like this, silent, suspended on the edge of the water.

STEEDS
Are you in love with Bill the Magnificent?

Beat. Annabel yanks Steeds away from the edge. They stay very close to each other.

ANNABEL
What if I could teach you how to breathe?

STEEDS

That's not how it works.
It's not something you can teach.

ANNABEL
Just look at me.
No.
Close your eyes!

STEEDS
This isn't a trick, is it?

ANNABEL
No.
Not a trick.

Steeds cautiously closes his eyes. Annabel is about to touch him. He squints one eye open.

ANNABEL
Keep em' closed.

He closes again. She slowly puts one hand on his chest. She presses in.

STEEDS
Ow!

ANNABEL
Shhh.

She continues to press, making this up as she goes along. He tries to breathe, but it is labored. As his breathing gets worse and worse, she suddenly leans in and mashes her mouth onto his. We do not know if this is a first kiss or some kind of CPR. She pulls back.

ANNABEL
Did it work?

STEEDS
(Sputtering for words)
How did you do that?

Beat. Annabel shrugs.

ANNABEL
Magic.

Annabel starts to exit. Steeds call after her.

STEEDS
Hey!

He walks to her.

STEEDS
Tomorrow.
I'll watch the fireworks with you.

ANNABEL
Gee thanks.

STEEDS
Meet me at the carnival.
Once it gets dark.
I'll wait for you.

Annabel nods.

STEEDS
Your father?

ANNABEL
I can sneak away.
I've gotten good at that.

STEEDS
Okay.

ANNABEL
I'll be there.
(Beat.)
I promise.

Beat. Steeds shifts his weight around awkwardly.

ANNABEL
Well, bye.

She turns to exit.

STEEDS

Wait!

She stops, turns. He steps towards her, takes a deep breath. He holds out his inhaler for her to take. A beat.

STEEDS

I don't need it anymore.

Beat. Annabel grins, takes it.

They stare at each other for a moment. Then, Annabel exits.

Steeds crosses to his house and enters. He carefully sets up a fork. He takes a few steps back. He stares at the fork, casually at first. Then, he tenses up his entire body. He focuses. Maybe something is about to happen...?

A knock at the door. Steeds, who has been holding his breath, exhales loudly. He bends over, almost collapsing. He opens the door to find Doreen. She is wearing the silk dress.

DOREEN

You gonna let me in?

STEEDS

He's not here.

DOREEN

Maybe I came to see you.

You gonna let me in?

(Beat. Steeds is blocking the door.)

C'mon, it's cold.

A legitimate standoff.

Steeds takes a step back. He allows her to step inside. He has never been alone with Doreen.

Doreen breezes by Steeds, goes to the kitchen, pours herself a whiskey. Steeds watches her. She downs the shot. She takes a deep breath. She starts to pour herself another shot.

STEEDS

Can I get you something to drink?

Doreen freezes. Turns to Steeds. Steeds grins, slightly. Doreen pours the shot.

DOREEN

When'd you get so funny?

STEEDS

I dunno.

Doreen downs the shot. She brings the bottle and another glass to the table. She sits. She kicks a chair out for him.

DOREEN

Sit down.

(Beat. Steeds shrugs, remains standing.)

Have one with me.

Steeds shakes his head

DOREEN

S'bad manners.

Leaving me like this.

You never let a lady drink alone.

STEEDS

Jackie says-

DOREEN

Jackie ain't here.

(Beat.)

Have one.

C'mon.

STEEDS

No.

DOREEN

Just one.

(Beat.)

Please.

Another mini-standoff. Steeds sits. Doreen pours out two shots. She passes the glass to him. He picks up the glass, takes a sniff. He looks up at her. She raises her glass. He raises his. They drink. Whiskey is second nature to her. Not so much for Steeds. He chokes it down. He tries hard not to cough.

DOREEN

No.

See.

Don't make that face.

STEEDS

(Making a face) I'm not making a face.

DOREEN

You're getting older.

You're a man now.

So try again.

Without the face.

Doreen nods towards his glass. He slides it back to her. She refills the glasses. They repeat the ritual, raise the glasses, take the shot. He does better this time. Doreen nods her approval.

DOREEN

All right.

Again.

She pours out two more shots.

On the opposite side of the stage, Jackie stands outside of Annabel's house, waiting. She enters, stops when she sees him. A long pause.

JACKIE

I want you to leave my brother alone.

All right?

Leave him be.

Beat. Annabel takes a step towards her house.

JACKIE

He's very fragile, you know.

He doesn't even know how to breathe.

ANNABEL
Stop staring at me

JACKIE
What's that?

ANNABEL
You're always staring, Jackie.
It makes me sick.

Jackie motions to the house.

JACKIE
If your father saw me talking to you.
(Beat.)
Like this...

ANNABEL
So maybe you'd better quit it.

JACKIE
But it's so exciting.
Drifting into your orbit.

ANNABEL
Lemme by.

JACKIE
Annabel, where's he go?
Your father?
At night?

Beat. Annabel paces away.

JACKIE
You ever seen him with girls?
Women?
You ever see him with a girl
Wearing a silk dress?

ANNABEL
Stop it.

JACKIE

Oh you have.

Haven't you?

(Beat.)

And how's that make you feel?

Switch to Doreen and Steeds, drinking.

DOREEN

How's your girl?

STEEDS

No-

DOREEN

Yeah?

STEEDS

She's not my girl.

DOREEN

Why you blushing then?

STEEDS

I'm not!

DOREEN

Uh-huh.

Must be the light.

STEEDS

Yeah, the light.

DOREEN

I must be seeing things.

Getting old.

(She drinks.)

Aw, now you're grinning!

Steeds shoots up from the table, starts walking towards the kitchen.

DOREEN

You got one helluva poker face, you know that?

STEEDS

Quit messing with me.

DOREEN

Quit making it so goddamn easy.

Beat. Steeds sits back down.

STEEDS

What did he do to her?

Beat.

STEEDS

Doreen.

(Beat.)

She said he stares at her.

Like he wants to hurt her.

Beat. Doreen pours herself a drink. Steeds stares at her. She brings the glass to her lips.

STEEDS

What did he do?

Please.

I need to know.

DOREEN

What difference does it make?

Beat. Doreen takes the shot. Maybe this one goes down a little rough. Steeds doesn't stop looking at her. She sighs, meets his gaze.

DOREEN

After Jack the Bear died,

Jackie was, what?

Fifteen?

(Beat.)

Him and Annabel got close.

STEEDS

She used to come around.

Sometimes.
I remember.

DOREEN
Well, don't you think that's strange?
(Beat.)
Fifteen-year-old boy.
Gettin' close to a little girl like that?

STEEDS
What happened?

Beat. She pours another shot.

DOREEN
Probably nothing.
(Beat.)
Maybe something.
(Beat.)
I don't know.
Steeds, I honestly don't
But whatever it was.
Her father found out.
Her father didn't like it.
You understand?

Switch to Jackie and Annabel.

JACKIE
You don't miss coming around?

ANNABEL
No.

JACKIE
We sure miss you.
(Beat.)
Annabel, can't you hear?
Ain't you listening?
I'm tryin' to reveal myself to you.

Beat. Annabel takes a few steps away.

ANNABEL

All I was...

(Beat.)

I was trying to comfort you, Jackie.

I was trying to offer comfort.

JACKIE

Uh-huh.

ANNABEL

Because no one else would.

Beat. Annabel straightens up her posture.

ANNABEL

But I'm older now.

It wasn't right, Jackie.

It wasn't good.

JACKIE

You're twisting everything up.

ANNABEL

I'm careful now.

I'm more careful with kindness.

JACKIE

What are you doing with Steeds?

ANNABEL

I like him.

JACKIE

You like him this summer.

Sure.

What about next summer?

Beat. No answer.

JACKIE

You're just like your father.

You're all the same

You use people

And then you let them go.

Annabel tries to get past Jackie. He stops her.

JACKIE

No, see.

I been waiting an awful long time
For you to hear me out.

ANNABEL

You're a baby.

JACKIE

No.

ANNABEL

A child.

It's pathetic.

Jackie roughly kisses Annabel. She tries to pull away. A few second in this. Awful. Violent. Annabel finally wrestles herself away. A long pause.

JACKIE

I didn't-

Annabel runs off. Jackie stands still, surprised by what he has done. He stands and looks at Annabel's house.

Back to Steeds and Doreen.

DOREEN

You ever wonder why I stay with Jackie?

(Beat. She drinks.)

How he treats me.

Hell, you know.

And you got it worse.

(Beat. She picks up her empty glass, rotates it in her hand.)

I could get up and leave.

STEEDS

So why don't you?

She sets the glass back down on the table.

DOREEN
For the longest time.
I thought.
There's something else out there.
Something waiting.
But there just
Isn't.

Pause. Doreen is lost in her thoughts.

STEEDS
You know that story?
About Jack the Bear?
The time I almost drowned.

DOREEN
Uh-huh.

STEEDS
You know how that story ends?

Doreen nods.

STEEDS
It was my fault.
Our father.
Gone.
(*Steeds snaps.*)
Like that.
Because of me.
And I'm all that's left over.
All Jackie gets to look at.
Every day.
(*Steeds shrugs.*)
I mean.
I understand.
I'd hate me too.

DOREEN
You were only a kid.

STEEDS

I know.

DOREEN

It's not your fault.

She grabs his arm, roughly.

DOREEN

Hey, listen.

Okay?

Listen to me.

She leans in closer, pulls him down to her.

DOREEN

Everybody gets one good summer.

Even people like us.

So enjoy it.

Even if things

Don't turn out quite right.

Keep the good parts close.

Steeds nods. Doreen starts to pour another shot. Steeds grasps her arm, gently.

STEEDS

You look pretty tonight.

DOREEN

Yeah?

STEEDS

Real pretty.

And I don't care what Jackie says.

It looks like silk to me.

Doreen smiles.

Unseen, Annabel approaches the house, still shaken from her encounter with Jackie. She is about to enter the house, when she sees Steeds with Doreen. She stops, lingers in the doorway, watching.

Doreen takes Steeds' face in her hands.

She kisses him deeply. She separates, smiles.

DOREEN

I'm gonna remember this night.

(She pats her heart.)

I'm gonna keep it right here.

She wants to say something else. She doesn't.

As she turns to exit, Annabel runs off. Doreen exits.

Steeds, in shock, sits back down at the table. He pours himself a drink.

Bill's tent. He is packing up to leave. Annabel enters. She stares at him for a moment.

ANNABEL

You're leaving?

Beat. Bill turns to her.

BILL

Time for a new town.

Don't you think?

(Beat.)

New rides.

New games.

Different air.

(Beat. Bill looks closer at her.)

Something wrong?

ANNABEL

The Drowning Trick.

BILL

What about it?

ANNABEL

We didn't finish.

Bill takes a step to her.

BILL

We'll pick it up next summer.

ANNABEL
You'll come back?

BILL
Sure.

ANNABEL
You mean it?

Beat. He doesn't mean it.

ANNABEL
Take me with you.

BILL
Annabel.

ANNABEL
I'm serious.

BILL
Come on, now.
You can't leave.
What about your little friend, huh?
(Beat.)
What about your family?

ANNABEL
There's nothing for me here.

BILL
You don't mean that.

ANNABEL
There's nothing weighing me down.
Not anymore.

Annabel steps towards Bill.

ANNABEL
Take me with you.
(Beat.)

Make me disappear.

The house. A few hours have passed. Steeds still at the table, drinking. Jackie enters, catching Steeds mid-pour. A frozen moment,

JACKIE

You drinking my whiskey now?

A beat. Steeds is still frozen. Jackie grins.

JACKIE

Well, go on.

Pour me one too.

Beat. Steeds finishes pouring his shot and pours one for Jackie. Jackie sits. They raise their glasses.

JACKIE

What should we drink to?

Steeds shrugs. They take the shots. Jackie pours two more.

JACKIE

Hey

I'm thinking tomorrow

We get some firecrackers

Have a little party.

Me you and Doreen.

We'll get some of those loud ones you like.

STEEDS

That's you.

JACKIE

What's that?

STEEDS

You like the loud ones.

JACKIE

Yeah.

Right.

Jackie takes shot, Steeds leaves his.

STEEDS

I'm going to the carnival.

JACKIE

C'mon ain't you sick of it, yet?

STEEEDS

I'm going with Annabel.

(Beat.)

We're gonna watch the big fireworks.

Together

Jackie pours himself another shot and takes it.

STEEDS

She asked me to.

She wants me to.

JACKIE

Jesus, can't you-?

STEEDS

What?

Beat. Jackie is in the middle of pouring another shot, but puts the glass down.

JACKIE

I'm trying to help you.

STEEDS

You're jealous.

JACKIE

Don't.

STEEDS

She likes me.

Loves me maybe.

It burns you up.

JACKIE

Stop it right there.

STEEDS

You think.

I don't deserve anything.

JACKIE

That's not true.

Beat.

JACKIE

Stay away from her.

(Beat.)

You're not going tomorrow.

Okay?

Stay away from her.

Leave it alone.

STEEDS

I'm not scared of you, Jackie.

JACKIE

Oh yeah?

JACKIE

You just make me sad.

*Jackie nods, finishes pouring his shot. He picks it up, looks at the glass in his hand.
Steeds stands up to leave.*

JACKIE

You know what really happened?

(Beat.)

You know what all the fuss was about?

Beat.

JACKIE

It was her father.

(Beat. Jackie takes the shot.)

He didn't like the way I was looking at her.

Beat. Jackie reclines, shrugging.

JACKIE

That's the whole story.

Chapter One to The End.

(Jackie pours another shot.)

After Jack the Bear died.

(Small beat.)

I mean, shit, Steeds.

You didn't talk too much to begin with.

And then Jack died.

And you clammed up completely.

It was like living with a god damn mute.

(Beat. Jackie shakes his head.)

So all I had was silence.

Every day.

And no one in this town would even look at me.

No one thought to offer comfort.

Or kindness.

I was alone.

But then she started coming around.

Hell, I know it was strange.

I know how it looked,

But she talked to me.

(Beat. Jackie smiles, remembering.)

It was nice, okay?

I liked it.

And then one day.

Word spread.

I suppose.

Her father saw us.

Together.

And I wasn't hurting her.

I wasn't touching her,

I wasn't...

Swear on my life.

We were just talking.

We used to just talk.

(Beat.)

But he didn't like the way I was looking at her.

(Beat.)

I'm trying to help you.

Beat. Jackie exits. Steeds lays down on the ground.

The Poor Boys join him. They dream together.

POOR BOY #1

That night, Steeds dreams of open space.

POOR BOY #2

His head above water.

POOR BOY #3

4th of July fireworks.

POOR BOY #1

A life outside this house.

POOR BOY #2

This town.

POOR BOY #3

And through it all.

POOR BOY #1

Her eyes.

The group wakes up.

POOR BOY #1

And when he awakes.

POOR BOY #2

Things like.

POOR BOY #3

Love.

POOR BOY #1

Warmth.

POOR BOY #2

Happiness.

POOR BOY #3

All those things are very close.

POOR BOY #1

Almost to touch.

Bright light shining.

POOR BOY #2

Bathing his room

POOR BOY #3

The comfort scent.

POOR BOY #1

Of summer air.

POOR BOY #2

If only he'd known.

POOR BOY #3

Sensed somehow.

POOR BOY #1

If he'd only he felt.

POOR BOY #2

That gentle chill.

POOR BOY #3

Running up his spine.

Colder than he'd thought.

POOR BOY #1

The air, somehow.

POOR BOY #2

Somehow different.

POOR BOY #1

If only he'd seen.

POOR BOY #2

That while he was sleeping.

POOR BOY #3
All those things.

POOR BOY #1
Were pulling away.

POOR BOY #2
While he was sleeping.

POOR BOY #3
Scheming in dreams.

POOR BOY #1
If the pit in his stomach.

POOR BOY #2
Had risen up his throat.

POOR BOY #3
If only he'd known.

POOR BOY #1
The girl he ached for.

POOR BOY #3
The one that he

POOR BOY #1
Was running to meet.

POOR BOY #2
Had already gone.

Lights get darker.

POOR BOY #3
4th of July night.

The crack of fireworks. Poor Boys and Steeds cross to the carnival. 4th of July music.

POOR BOY #1
Steeds waits

POOR BOY #2

At the carnival.

Anxious.

POOR BOY #3

But full of hope.

POOR BOY #1

His mind filling up.

POOR BOY #2

With the possibility

POOR BOY #3

Of the night.

POOR BOY #1

He keeps his eyes.

POOR BOY #2

Glued to the sky.

POOR BOY #3

Trying to memorize the color and shape.

POOR BOY #1

Of every firework.

POOR BOY #2

Each blast of light.

POOR BOY #3

So when she comes.

POOR BOY #1

He can describe them in perfect detail.

POOR BOY #2

And he starts to form.

POOR BOY #3

The words in his mind.

POOR BOY #1
Tonight is the night.

POOR BOY #2
He'll tell her.

POOR BOY #3
How happy she makes him.

POOR BOY #1
How scared.
Thrilled.

POOR BOY #2
How full.

POOR BOY #3
Every time he looks at her.

POOR BOY #1
The world gets wider.

POOR BOY #2
Maybe
Someday
She can
Teach him how to swim.

Beat. Fireworks continue to flash. Steeds start to look around.

POOR BOY #3
But the sky grows darker.
The fireworks fade.

POOR BOY #1
Perhaps she's forgotten?

POOR BOY #2
Maybe she couldn't

POOR BOY #3
Sneak away.
From her father

Maybe it wasn't

POOR BOY #1

As easy as she thought.

But she promised.

POOR BOY #2

Holding out hope.

POOR BOY #3

Time moving different now.

POOR BOY #1

Quicker.

POOR BOY #2

Like water

POOR BOY #3

Circling the drain.

And the open night.

POOR BOY #1

All the possibility.

POOR BOY #2

The magic of anticipation.

POOR BOY #3

Little by little

His heart is starting to close.

POOR BOY #1

For the first time

He takes his eyes off the sky.

Steeds stands.

POOR BOY #2

Where

Is

She?

The Poor Boys take out flashlights and start to search around the stage. Steeds looks with him

POOR BOY #1

Cracks.

POOR BOY #2

And crevices.

POOR BOY #3

Which one did she fall through?

POOR BOY #1

He searches

POOR BOY #2

Every inch

POOR BOY #3

Of the carnival

POOR BOY #1

Fear rising now.

POOR BOY #2

The lights of the rides

POOR BOY #3

Growing dim.

POOR BOY #1

And the music.

POOR BOY #2

The crowds.

POOR BOY #3

Fading out.

Leaving him.

POOR BOY #1

Alone.

(Beat.)

And then suddenly

POOR BOY #2

It hits him.

POOR BOY #3

Like a brick.

The only stone.

POOR BOY #1

Left unturned.

POOR BOY #2

The only place left.

POOR BOY #3

He doesn't want to look.

POOR BOY #1

That tent.

POOR BOY #2

Tucked away.

POOR BOY #3

In the corner of darkness.

Steeds approaches Bill's tent. He looks into the tent, doesn't see anything. He tears the tent down. It is empty. He stands, staring at the empty tent.

Another spot on the stage. Bill flips cards into a hat. Annabel sits on the floor. She holds the inhaler in her hand, looks at it.

BILL

What's the matter?

ANNABEL

Nothing.

(Beat.)

It doesn't feel like I thought it would.

BILL

And how did you think it would feel?

Pause. Annabel considers the question. Bill continues flicking the cards. She continues to look at the inhaler

Steeds enters his house. The box is out. Jackie stands by the box, waiting. Steeds sees the box. He looks to Jackie.

JACKIE

Get in.

Slowly, Steeds shakes his head. Jackie is close to tears.

JACKIE

I told you not to go.

I gave you fair warning.

STEEDS

She's gone.

JACKIE

What?

STEEDS

She left.

No one knows where.

JACKIE

Get in.

Silence.

JACKIE

Get

IN.

Pause. Steeds starts to exit. Jackie chokes back a sob. He opens the top of the box. Steeds stops.

Pause. Jackie pleads.

JACKIE

You just have to do it for a little while.

Pause. Steeds walks to the box. He looks at Jackie. He gets in the box. Jackie closes the top and locks it. He looks at the box. He exits. As soon as he's gone, Poor Boys enter, walk to the box.

POOR BOY #1

It always confused him.

POOR BOY #2

How everyone else.

POOR BOY #3

Just knew how to breathe.

Steed takes a cautious, gentle breath.

POOR BOY #1

Inhale.

POOR BOY #2

Exhale.

POOR BOY #3

Belly fills up.

POOR BOY #1

Air comes out.

POOR BOY #2

Easy.

Natural.

Poor Boys breathe.

POOR BOY #3

Never for him.

Steeds takes another breath.

POOR BOY #1

But this summer.

POOR BOY #2

Something.

POOR BOY #3
Changed.

POOR BOY #1
And each new breath.

POOR BOY #2
Was a gift.

POOR BOY #3
A novelty.

POOR BOY #1
See, the weight on his chest.

POOR BOY #2
Crumbled to dust.

POOR BOY #3
And the grip on his lungs.

POOR BOY #1
Had loosened considerably.

POOR BOY #2
When he was smaller.

POOR BOY #3
These nights

POOR BOY #1
In the box.

POOR BOY #2
Would feel cruel.

POOR BOY #3
Endless.

POOR BOY #1
But this time.

POOR BOY #2

He knew.

POOR BOY #3

The night would pass.

POOR BOY #1

The box would open

POOR BOY #2

The light would greet him.

POOR BOY #3

The next morning.

POOR BOY #1

He'd look for her.

POOR BOY #2

And this time.

POOR BOY #3

He'd find her.

POOR BOY #1

This time.

POOR BOY #2

He was sure.

POOR BOY #3

The night would pass.

POOR BOY #1

All he needed.

POOR BOY #2

Was a little help.

Steeds feels for his inhaler in his pocket. It is not there. He checks his other pocket. A quick frenzy of activity as he checks everywhere on his body. And then he realizes. He doesn't have it. He goes completely still.

POOR BOY #3
But, see the funny thing.

POOR BOY #1
About breath.

Steeds starts breathing hard, violently.

POOR BOYS #1
Sometimes just.

POOR BOY #2
When you think you have it.

POOR BOY #3
You don't.

Steeds' breathing becomes more violent.

POOR BOY #1
But Jackie would come back.

POOR BOY #2
Jackie would realize.

POOR BOY #3
He had to.

POOR BOY #1
But what.

POOR BOY #2
If.

POOR BOY #3
He didn't?

More violent. Poor Boys watch in silence.

POOR BOY #1
What had she told him?

POOR BOY #2

What had she said?

POOR BOY #3

That night?

Poor Boys and Steeds remember.

POOR BOY #1

When you're down.

POOR BOY #2

When you're really down.

POOR BOY #3

Think of me.

Pause.

POOR BOY #1

So he did.

Steeds' breathing slows down. He tries calm down. He can't. He chokes out air while trying to breathe easy. He shuts his eyes. Poor Boys watch.

Time passes. It is now close to dawn. The creek. A figure, shrouded in darkness, sits by the water. Annabel comes on. She sees the figure. It must be Steeds. She approaches the figure, excited. It isn't Steeds.

Jackie stands up and faces Annabel. He holds a bottle of whiskey. A full pause.

JACKIE

He said you left.

ANNABEL

I came back.

Pause.

ANNABEL

Where is he?

No response.

ANNABEL

Hey-

JACKIE

I told him you'd leave.

ANNABEL

Jackie.

JACKIE

I knew it.

Beat.

ANNABEL

You're so *sure* I'm gonna hurt him.

But how do you know?

What if I don't?

JACKIE

C'mon.

ANNABEL

Answer me.

JACKIE

Go home, Annabel.

Jackie starts to leave. Annabel doesn't.

ANNABEL

You were wrong about him.

You were wrong about Steeds.

JACKIE

Yeah, how's that?

ANNABEL

He knows how to breathe now.

Annabel takes out the inhaler. Holds it proudly. Jackie can't see it, he walks closer.

ANNABEL

See, I taught him.
It wasn't a trick.

JACKIE
What is that?

He walks to her.

ANNABEL
He gave it to me.

Jackie snatches the inhaler from her. Looks at it. A realization. He staggers back a few steps.

JACKIE
No.

ANNABEL
He said-

JACKIE
No.

ANNABEL
He said he didn't need it anymore.

JACKIE
Please, no.

ANNABEL
Where is he?

Jackie staggers off, starts to run. Annabel is really freaked out now. She yells after him.

ANNABEL
Jackie, what did you do?

Jackie is gone. Annabel chases after him.

The house. The box. Poor Boys continue to watch.

POOR BOY #1
As his lungs closed.

POOR BOY #2
For the final time.

POOR BOY #3
A door slamming shut.

POOR BOY #1
He didn't feel fear.

POOR BOY #2
Or pain.

POOR BOY #3
Or regret.

POOR BOY #1
He thought instead.

POOR BOY #2
Of the moon hanging high.

POOR BOY #3
Poor stars in the sky.

POOR BOY #1
One turn on the Ferris Wheel.

Jackie and Annabel enter the house. Jackie walks to the box. Annabel stands frozen, unable to move. Poor Boys turn to watch them.

POOR BOY #2
The light now leaving.

POOR BOY #3
And Steeds is ready.

POOR BOY #1
Not thinking.

POOR BOY #2
About what is happening.

POOR BOY #3
Or what happens next.

POOR BOY #1
His only thought
In fact.

POOR BOY #2
Is that
This was.

POOR BOY #3
By far.

POOR BOY #1
Without a doubt.
The greatest.

POOR BOY #2
Summer.

POOR BOY #3
Of.
His.
Life.

Annabel, Jackie, and Poor Boys stand perfectly still.

Lights go down.

END OF PLAY

LYLA SCHOOL
By Brian Kettler

TIME

Adult Sections take place in the present. Childhood Sections take place 20 years in the past.

LOCATION

Lyla School, a private, arts based elementary school.

A bar near Lyla School.

CHARACTERS

AHMED- 30-years-old in Adult Sections and 10-years-old in Childhood Sections. Middle-Eastern. The same adult actor plays Ahmed in both sections. Ahmed is quiet, intense and thoughtful.

MARY- 30-years-old in Adult Sections and 10-years-old in Childhood Sections. The same adult actor plays Mary in both sections. Mary is smart, mischievous and tough.

MAGDA- 40's. The founder of Lyla School. Kind and nurturing. A tranquil exterior masks a heavy heart and occasional cruel streak.

MIKEAL- 60's. Magda's husband. Teaches at Lyla School. Eastern-European. Gentle and brilliant.

PROLOGUE

A figure wearing a Cyclops mask sits in a chair, center stage. Shrouded in darkness, perfectly still. A few moments of the figure alone on stage.

AHMED and MARY, both 10, scamper on. They are holding hands. They stop when they see the Cyclops. Tense silence. They look at each other.

AHMED

You go.

MARY

No, you.

Silence. Ahmed takes a step forward. He looks back at Mary. He takes another step.

He doesn't want to go.

He forces himself. He approaches the figure. Very slowly, he takes off the Cyclops mask. He drops the mask onto the floor. He steps back.

Underneath the mask is the face of a corpse. Cut up and bloody. Deeply terrifying. Both eyes have been gouged out.

Mary walks to join Ahmed. They look at the face. Silent and still until...

Mary grabs Ahmed in fear. She turns to look at an unseen figure who has entered the space. Ahmed and Mary stare at the unseen figure.

MARY

No, Matthew.

Mary takes a step towards the unseen figure. Ahmed joins her.

MARY

No no no no no.

Mary puts her hand up. She shields her face. Ahmed does the same.

In darkness, we hear a gunshot. The sound of sirens. Mayhem. Tragedy.

END OF PROLOGUE

FIRST MOVEMENT

Mary, 30, waits nervously at a small town bar. The decor is cheerfully generic. You wouldn't remember this place.

She is probably a little overdressed. And her clothes are splattered with blood.

She fidgets with her fruity drink. She takes the cherry out. She ponders it in her hand. She puts the cherry in her mouth. She tries to tie the cherry stem with her tongue. She starts choking. She coughs out the stem.

Ahmed, 30, enters. He has a carry-on sized piece of luggage. Sharply dressed, but not over the top. His clothes are also splattered with blood.

He spots Mary. He makes a direct line to her. He stands next to the table, uncomfortable. They look at each other.

MARY

How did you know it was me?

Beat. Ahmed considers the question. Gently, he leans over the table and kisses her cheek. Mary stays still. Ahmed sits down across from her. He puts his bag down. Mary takes a large gulp of her drink.

MARY

Did you come right from the airport?

AHMED

Yeah

MARY
Where are you staying?

AHMED
I'm not.
(*Ahmed signals to an unseen waiter.*)
Manhattan.

MARY
Wow!

AHMED
(*To waiter*)
Extra bitters.
(*To Mary*)
My flight's at six.

MARY
Cool order.

AHMED
(*To waiter*)
Actually, you know what?

MARY
I feel like I'm in a *commercial*.
Wait, six in the morning?

AHMED
(*To waiter*)
Just a Ginger Ale.

MARY
That's like ten hours.

AHMED
(*To waiter*)
Just water.

MARY
Less than ten hours.

AHMED

(To Mary)
I have to get back.

MARY
I thought you'd stay the night.

AHMED
(To waiter)
No actually.
Nothing.
Sorry
Actually, I want nothing.

The unseen waiter lingers. Ahmed nods decisively. The unseen waiter exits. Ahmed turns back to Mary.

AHMED
Sorry.

MARY
(A joke)
Are you an alcoholic or something?
(Beat. Something clicks.)
Oh my God, you're an alcoholic.

AHMED
Well...

MARY
I'm an asshole.

AHMED
It's not a big deal.

MARY
(Shaking her head) Nice start, Mary.
Hey, do you get prizes?

AHMED
For what?

MARY
Sobriety.
Are you in AA?

AHMED
Uh-huh.

MARY
This girl I used to work with.
She was in AA.
She got prizes.
Like those pendant things?

AHMED
We get sobriety coins.

MARY
That's cool!

Ahmed eyes her suspiciously.

AHMED
Yeah, it's really cool.

MARY
Coins are cool.

AHMED
You look good, Mary.

MARY
Thanks.
I'm an idiot.
You look good too.
(Beat.)
Do you have short hair cuz you like it or are you going bald?

AHMED
Bald.

MARY
Well.
I think it's fine if you embrace it early.

Plus, you're pretty trim.

(Pause. Breath. She looks at him, estimating his weight.)

I was at a party.

Last month.

And this guy said I'd be really beautiful if I lost ten pounds.

Can you believe that?

AHMED

Asshole.

MARY

I really wanted to sleep with him.

He told me to eat five meals a day.

But small ones.

Is that what you do?

AHMED

What?

MARY

Five meals.

AHMED

I just don't get that hungry.

MARY

Wow.

You're lucky.

Food is like.

An *issue* for me.

AHMED

Oh.

MARY

I'm just kidding.

Hey.

(She raises her glass.)

Happy Anniversary.

AHMED

(Raises his hand.)

Cheers.

What made you pick this place?

MARY

(Shrugs) Close to school.

Magda wants us there at 10.

AHMED

Yeah.

MARY

How do you think it will be?

AHMED

What?

MARY

Going back.

AHMED

Um, fine.

MARY

Yeah, me too!

That's what I think.

AHMED

I think it will be fine.

(Beat.)

I'm not really looking for...

MARY

What?

AHMED

You know.

Some big thing.

MARY

Oh, me neither.

AHMED

Some big Magda thing.

MARY
We'll probably just sing songs and hold hands.

AHMED
Yeah.

MARY
It's cool she invited us.

AHMED
Cool?

MARY
20 years.

AHMED
Are we celebrating?

MARY
No.
Of course not.
(Beat.)
I miss her sometimes.
Even though I don't want to.
It was good to hear from her.
(Beat.)
It was good to hear from *you*
(Beat. She shakes her head.)
Hey, can we start over?

AHMED
Sure.

MARY
I'm not talking about tonight.
I mean like.
Can we just...
Put it in reverse?

She puts it in reverse.

AHMED
I think that sounds, uh...

Beat. Mary takes another large, uncomfortable gulp.

AHMED

How's your dad?

MARY

Dead.

Cremated.

Ground into a fine powder.

AHMED

Sorry to hear that.

MARY

Surprised?

AHMED

No...

MARY

I keep his urn in the bathroom.

On a shelf across from the toilet.

So when I do a number two.

I can have a good long think about our relationship.

Mary takes a drink.

AHMED

I'm really sorry.

MARY

(Shrugs) Well, maybe someday I'll just burst into tears.

AHMED

You had a complicated relationship.

MARY

Uh-huh.

But isn't that just a fancy way of saying we didn't really love each other?

Beat. She leans forward on her fists. Stares him down. He has to look away.

AHMED

I need a drink.

MARY

(Sincere) I think that's an *excellent* idea.

A simple scene change. We transform into Lyla School. Mary and Ahmed are now their ten-year-old selves. The bloody clothes are removed. They now wear some kind of simple childhood garb. Mary and Ahmed fall back into this time shift easily.

Lyla School is a small, private arts-based elementary school. More like a commune than an academic institution. Way out in the wilderness. Lyla School attracts students who require some extra attention, care. Lyla School is not fancy but it is beautiful.

Mary is giving Ahmed a tour. Ahmed eyes his surroundings. Mary stops.

MARY

Here are the bathrooms.

Do you have to go?

Beat. Ahmed shakes his head.

MARY

Thursdays are field days.

That means we go to Blanchard Woods.

And when we're out there, everyone just goes to the bathroom wherever.

Number one, I mean.

I've never done a number two in Blanchard Woods.

Beat. Ahmed nods.

MARY

Do you want to see the library?

It's my favorite part of the school.

There's a million books.

Beat. Ahmed does not react, continues looking around.

MARY

No, you don't understand.

There's exactly a million.

I counted.

AHMED
No you didn't.

MARY
Yes, I did!
Don't call me a liar!

AHMED
Well, I don't know if you're a liar.
But you definitely just lied.

Beat. Mary plots her next move.

MARY
Actually I was testing you.
To see if you were stupid.
(*Small beat.*)
You're not.

AHMED
I know.

MARY
Everyone here is pretty smart.
People cry a lot.
Not me.
But it's okay if you want to.
Do you want to?

AHMED
No.

MARY
Magda's really nice.
If you start crying.
She says.
(*Mary spreads her arms wide.*)
"OOOOHHH, LET IT OUT!!!! LET IT OUT!!!!!"
She says crying is healthy for the body.
People who don't cry get heart attacks.

AHMED
That's not true.

MARY
I know.
I was testing you again.
Want to see inside The Girls' Bathroom?

AHMED
Sure.

MARY
We'd better not.
You'd just be disappointed.
I read this book and the boy wants to go in the Girl's Bathroom.
(*Mary laughs.*)
He thinks they have a pink fountain in the Girl's Bathroom!

AHMED
That's really dumb.

MARY
Yeah.
That's what I was saying.
It's dumb
(*Beat.*)
So, how come you're at Lyla School?

AHMED
I got kicked out of my other one.

MARY
What did you do?
Did you cheat on a test?
We don't have tests here.

AHMED
There was this kid, Jamie.
He called me a terrorist, so I bit him on the cheek really hard.
He had to go the hospital.

Mary stops in her tracks. Whoa.

MARY
What did his cheek taste like?

AHMED
I don't know.
Salty skin.

MARY
Coooool.
You're not going to do that to me.

AHMED
As long as you don't call me a terrorist.

MARY
I'm not sure I know what that word means.
But we don't call each other names at Lyla School.
It's a rule.

AHMED
Okay

MARY
It's a very good rule.
Do you know the Golden Rule?

AHMED
No.

MARY
The Golden Rule is that if you treat someone mean, they'll be mean to you.
And if you treat someone nice, they'll be nice.
And eye for an eye
And tooth for tooth.
That's the Golden Rule.

AHMED
It would be weird if you switched eyes with someone.
Put their eye in your eye hole and tried to see.
Wouldn't that be weird?

MARY
It would be SO cool.

AHMED

I saw a movie once where this guy took out another guy's eye with a spoon.

MARY

That sounds scary.

AHMED

It was on cable.

I watched when my parents went to bed.

(Beat.)

I couldn't sleep afterwards.

MARY

That's okay.

(Beat.)

People here are nice.

Especially Magda and Mikeal.

Matthew isn't nice. He's with us sometimes, when he's not at his own school.

He's Magda's son, but he's not nice.

My dad works here!

AHMED

Magda said.

MARY

My dad works at Lyla School!

He didn't like missing me when he was at his old job.

So he's another person too.

AHMED

What about Lucas?

Beat. Mary makes a shape on the floor with her shoe.

MARY

Lucas is good at drawing.

AHMED

Is he your friend?

MARY

I'm okay at drawing but my best is reading.

AHMED

He was staring at me.

MARY

That's just because you're new.

AHMED

Does Lucas hit?

MARY

What?

AHMED

He looks like he hits.

MARY

No, that's not allowed.

There are other ways to solve problems other than hitting.

(Beat.)

You can be friends with me now if you want.

Beat.

AHMED

Can I see the library?

End of Childhood Section. We transition back into the bar. The bloody clothes come back on. Mary and Ahmed are adults again.

The table is now littered with empty glasses. They've been drinking. The glasses have little umbrellas in them. Two of the glasses still have booze. Ahmed picks up one of the empty glasses, puts it down, disappointed. Mary shakes her head.

Ahmed's cell phone buzzes on the table. He ignores it, tries another glass. Empty.

MARY

You gonna get that?

Ahmed silences the buzzing phone.

AHMED

So, what, you're a waitress?

MARY

No!

God.

No.

Gross.

Ahmed.

C'mon.

AHMED

Tell me again.

MARY

Okay.

It's a really expensive place.

Drinks.

Food.

Entertainment!

AHMED

You're like a sommelier?

MARY

There's a pink fountain!

I swear, like in the-

Wait, a sleepwalker?

AHMED

That's somnambulist.

You make recommendations?

MARY

I put on-

AHMED

Wine recommendations.

MARY

Every night, I put on a fancy dress.

Sometimes spansks, you know, for the last ten pounds.

I've gotten very good at make-up.

An hour in front of the mirror.

AHMED

You look great.

MARY

Oh, no.

(Motions to her face.)

This is like.

Amateur.

You should really see.

AHMED

But what do you *do*?

Pause. Mary takes a long drink.

MARY

Well.

I guess.

For lack of a...

(She shrugs.)

Company.

AHMED

Company?

MARY

Mm-hmmm.

She drinks out of one of the full glasses. Ahmed is confused. Then, he gets it.

AHMED

Oh....

MARY

No!

AHMED

Okay.

MARY

That's not.

That's not what I meant.

AHMED

Company, sure.

MARY

(Wags her finger) Not what you're thinking.

AHMED

(Shrugs) Nothing wrong with company.

MARY

Don't look at me like that.

That's not allowed, Mr. Ahmed.

AHMED

You sound just like her.

MARY

What?

AHMED

Just then.

"Mr. Ahmed."

You sound like Magda.

Joke's over, Mary shakes her head.

AHMED

What?

MARY

Nothing!

(Beat.)

It's just.

Uh.

(Beat.)

That's like literally the worst, most awful hateful thing you could ever say to me.

AHMED

Sorry?

MARY

Oh, it's not a big deal.

Beat. Ahmed finds the other full glass, drinks, smiles.

AHMED

You think she's gonna light some candles?

(Beat.)

We'll sit in a circle.

Or a triangle, I guess.

Now it's just a triangle.

(Beat.)

Maybe some Enya?

MARY

It's a really nice place.

Where I work.

Legitimate.

AHMED

I understand.

MARY

You don't!

I'm like.

Really.

Happy.

AHMED

Uh-huh.

MARY

All the time.

Just,

HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY.

AHMED

Well cheers to that.

They toast and drink. Mary starts speaking before she's done drinking.

MARY

I'm a sparkling conversationalist.

Ahmed keeps drinking.

MARY
Slow down, all right.
It's fun to dress up.
It's just like...

AHMED
Don't.

MARY
When we used to dress up.
It's just pretend.

AHMED
It's nothing like that.
That was different.
Everything was-

MARY
What?
(*Beat.*)
Look at us now.

AHMED
I'm gonna need another.

MARY
Hey, I'm all for falling off the wagon.

AHMED
Cheers.

MARY
But maybe you don't want to get.
Like.
Totally detached.

AHMED
It's that kind of night.

MARY
How long has it been?

AHMED
20 years, Mary.

MARY
No.
Since you...

She mimes drinking. Ahmed shrugs.

MARY
C'mon.

AHMED
It's not a big deal.

MARY
I'm the last person in the entire world,
Who would ever judge you.

Ahmed bashfully holds up six fingers.

MARY
Years?

Ahmed shrugs.

MARY
Ah-med!

AHMED
It's not a big deal.

MARY
That's good.

AHMED
It's-

MARY
As long as it's not a big deal.

AHMED
It's complicated.

Mary digs into her purse for something. She doesn't find it. She looks up to see Ahmed staring at her.

MARY
What?

He continues staring.

MARY
Jesus, stop.

AHMED
I can see it.

MARY
What?

AHMED
I can see you sparkling.

Pause. Ahmed moves his chair closer to Mary.

AHMED
I didn't come for Magda.

MARY
No.

AHMED
I came for you.
Okay?
I came to see you.

MARY
Ahmed, stop.

Mary drinks.

MARY
Last week.
Uh...
I really don't want to tell you this.

An old man.
With floppy skin and varicose veins and one dead eye.
Like the Cyclops.
He wasn't into.
Sparkling conversation.
It's my job, you know, but the rules are...
Like the manager will tell me one set of rules and all the girls will tell me something else.
Everyone is telling me different rules.
And I woke up with his gray skin all over me.
I figured I should ask for money, but I just wanted to leave.
So I closed my eyes and guess what I thought about?
I thought about Blanchard Woods.

Mary finishes her drink.

AHMED
It's time.

MARY
No.

AHMED
It's time to go.

Ahmed fishes something out of his wallet. He slides it to Mary. She picks it up, looks at it. Instantly, she fights tears.

MARY
Who are these strange people?

AHMED
My family.
(*He points.*)
My wife.
And son.

MARY
He's so tiny.

AHMED
Yes.

MARY

Like, *really* tiny.
Is he okay?
He's not like a preemie?

AHMED
Don't say preemie.

MARY
Sorry.

AHMED
He's fine.
Healthy.

Beat. She looks at the picture.

MARY
And did you get married outside?
Was it a small wedding?
Did you get married on a hill?

AHMED
I don't remember.

MARY
Oh.

AHMED
Just about the hill, I mean.

MARY
Did you cut the cord?

AHMED
Yeah.

MARY
Was it gross?

AHMED
Yeah.

MARY

Did you know I can't have kids?

AHMED

Sorry.

MARY

What do you mean, "sorry?"

(Pause.)

I could always adopt. Or just steal one when their mom's not looking,

AHMED

How come you can't have kids?

MARY

I don't know.

Nervous stomach.

It's not like I even want one!

She looks close at the picture.

MARY

You look happy.

AHMED

Yeah.

MARY

Really happy.

This is a *really* good picture.

(Beat.)

Are you really that happy?

Beat. Ahmed takes picture from her. Looks at it. Smiles. Considers the question

AHMED

Absolutely not.

END OF FIRST MOVEMENT

SECOND MOVEMENT

Lyla School. The Barn, where the bulk of classes take place. MAGDA, 40's and MIKEAL, 60's. Mary and Ahmed, 10. Ahmed sits by himself, hugging his knees. Mikeal is wearing the Cyclops mask. Magda nudges him. Mikeal walks towards Ahmed. He ends up equidistant between Magda and Ahmed.

MAGDA

So first. Let's remember that this is a story.

Pause.

MAGDA

Ahmed.

What part of the story is this?

Can you tell me?

Pause. Mikeal goes to take off the mask. Magda holds up a hand to stop him.

MAGDA

Let's go back.

Who is the hero of the story?

Who is this story about?

Pause. Ahmed looks down. Mary speaks up, makes an O shape with her hands.

MARY

It starts with an "O"

Magda holds up her hand.

MAGDA

No, Mary.

Thank you, Mary.

Ahmed knows.

MARY

I was just helping.

MAGDA

Thank you, Mary.

MARY

You're welcome.

(Turns)

You're welcome, Ahmed.

AHMED

I didn't say thank you.

MARY

Yes, but you were thinking it.

MAGDA

Mary-

MARY

Didn't I tell you?

I can see in your thoughts now.

AHMED

No, you can't.

MARY

Uh-huh. My dad got me X-Ray glasses. Wanna see?

AHMED

You're such a liar.

MAGDA

Mr. Ahmed.

We don't call our friends names.

MARY

No, it's okay.

I actually decided I am a liar,

Because lying is really fun.

But this time, I happen to be telling the truth.

Mary runs off. Mikeal turns back to Magda. She motions him to go towards Ahmed. He takes one step forwards. Ahmed cowers. Mikeal stops. He starts to take his mask off.

MAGDA

No,

Not.

Yet.
Just.
Wait.

Mikeal sighs. He stops. Mary bounds on with the x-ray glasses. She goes right to Ahmed and sits down next to him. She grabs his head and they face each other. She puts on the glasses. She studies his face.

MARY
Okay.
Right now, you're thinking...
You're hungry.

AHMED
That's not fair.

MARY
I knew it!

AHMED
It's almost lunchtime. Of course I'm hungry.

MARY
You're thinking.
You're going to give me.
Half of your sandwich.

AHMED
No.

MARY
Yes.
I'm seeing that very clearly.

AHMED
So, what kind of sandwich is it?

Pause. Mary is momentarily stumped. She thinks hard.

MARY
(*Not very confident*)...Turkey?

AHMED

Peanut Butter.

MARY
Chunky?

AHMED
Creamy!
Ha ha ha!

MARY
Damn it!

MAGDA
Mary!

Mary roughly hugs Ahmed into her. He half-heartedly tries to get out of it. He doesn't try very hard.

MARY
Sorry, Magda.
Damn's not a bad one.

MAGDA
They're all bad.

MARY
Creamy Peanut Butter.
I should have known.

They wrestle for a few moments and separate. Magda takes a few steps closer.

MAGDA
What is the hero's name?

Small beat. Ahmed looks up at Magda.

AHMED
(Quietly) Odysseus.

MAGDA
Good.
And what does Odysseus want to do?

AHMED

He wants to go home.
But Poseidon.
Um, Poseidon...

Mary nods very seriously. Magda smiles.

MAGDA

If Odysseus made it home.
Without any trouble.
Without adventure.
It wouldn't be much of a story.
Would it?

AHMED

He wouldn't be much of a hero.

MAGDA

Yes, Mr. Ahmed.
You're right.
And what part of the story is this?

Pause. Ahmed looks to Mary, who nods.

AHMED

Odysseus and his friends.
Are on the island of The Cyclops.

MAGDA

And is The Cyclops a good guy or a bad guy?

MARY

Bad guy!
(*Beat. Mary puts her hands over her mouth.*)
Sorry.

Ahmed nods.

AHMED

Bad.

MAGDA

And who wins?

The good guys?

AHMED
Odysseus escapes.

Magda motions for Mikeal to move closer. This time, Ahmed does not step back.

MAGDA
Do you remember on Tuesday.
When we were making our Cyclops mask?
And we said the mask would be scary.
And that it was okay.
Because it's just pretend.
What color did you want to make the eye?

AHMED
Red!
Red eye is the scariest.

MAGDA
Look at the mask, Ahmed.
Do you see the red?

Ahmed nods.

MAGDA
That was because of you.
Your great suggestion.
And do you remember who is under the mask?

Ahmed shakes his head, a little confused. Magda nods to Mikeal. Mikeal slowly takes off the mask. Ahmed is calmly, pleasantly surprised.

AHMED
Oh.
Hi, Mikeal.

MIKEAL
Hello, Ahmed.

AHMED
I looked at the stars last night.
With the telescope.

MARY
You have a telescope?

AHMED
It's my mom's.
I saw the question mark.

MARY
I wanna play with it.

MIKEAL
The dipper.

AHMED
Yeah, the dipper.
(To Mary) It's not for playing.

MAGDA
Are you feeling better?

Ahmed nods.

MAGDA
There's nothing wrong with being scared.
Fear is just a little fence we jump over.

AHMED
A little fence?

MAGDA
Almost lunchtime!

Mary stands up and pulls Ahmed up with her. They follow Magda off. Ahmed turns back to Mikeal.

AHMED
You can put the mask back on.

Ahmed exits. Mikeal smiles to himself. He puts the mask back on and follows Ahmed off.

The Library. Mary sits with Ahmed at a long table. They drink hot chocolate. They wear fancy-looking dress-up robes. They both read books. A storm rages outside. Mary puts

her book down. Ahmed continues reading. She watches him for a few moments before speaking.

MARY

We're becoming very good friends.
But you can never be my best friend.

AHMED

(Without looking up) Why not?

Mary eyes the cover of this book.

MARY

You're not really reading.

AHMED

Yes I am.

MARY

That book is too advanced.
I tried, but it's too advanced.

AHMED

Magda told me to.

MARY

No, she didn't.

AHMED

I don't understand every word.
Like this one.

He opens the book on the table and points to a word. Mary leans over and tries to sound out.

MARY

That's an easy one.
P... Pre... Pr...
(She sits back down.)
That's a made-up word.

AHMED

No, it's not!

MARY

Yes, authors do that.

To test you.

To see if you really understand.

Ahmed writes something carefully in a notebook.

MARY

What are you doing?

AHMED

I write down the ones I don't know.

Then when I go home, my dad helps me find the meanings.

In his dictionary.

MARY

Well, don't bother, that one's made up.

AHMED

You should have your dad help you.

MARY

More hot cocoa?

Beat. Ahmed looks at Mary strangely. He nods, cautiously. She smiles, civilly. She fills her own cup. She fills Ahmed's cup. She pauses. She pours hot cocoa all over Ahmed's notebook.

AHMED

Hey!

MARY

Oh no.

AHMED

What are you doing?

MARY

It must have slipped.

Ahmed tears a page out of his notebook and tries to shake it dry. Mary calmly puts the cocoa pot down and sits back in her chair. Ahmed finishes drying the page and sits down. He glares at Mary. She holds up her book.

MARY

This one is excellent.

AHMED

I read that last year.

MARY

The main girl is wonderful.

AHMED

It's too easy for me.

MARY

Don't think you're so smart.

AHMED

That's a baby book.

Pause. Mary closes the book.

MARY

Did you know my dad protects Lyla School?

From all outside threats.

(Beat.)

Monsters.

Ahmed goes back to his book.

AHMED

He's just the groundskeeper.

MARY

And security.

AHMED

There's no security.

He cuts the grass.

And waters the plants.

MARY
Yes, exactly.
The grass is green-

AHMED
He's not a protector.
He yells sometimes.

MARY
The grass is green.
Because of him.

AHMED
Anybody can cut grass.
He yells out of nowhere sometimes when no one's doing anything.

MARY
No he doesn't.

AHMED
I don't like that.

MARY
That's not yelling.
What's *your* dad's job?

AHMED
He fixes people's eyes.

MARY
Whoa.
(*Beat.*)
Really?
How?

AHMED
I'm not sure.

MARY
Holy Hell.

AHMED
Don't.

MARY
Amazing!

AHMED
Don't say Holy Hell.

Beat.

MARY
My best friend is Lucas.

AHMED
He's nice to me now.

MARY
It's good you're fitting in better and not so quiet.

AHMED
He's coming to my house.

MARY
No!

AHMED
He's coming to my house for baseball.

MARY
No, he's *my* best friend.

AHMED
You can have more than one best friend.

MARY
No, you can't.
Sorry.

AHMED
You're *my* best friend.

MARY
That's not how it works, Ahmed.
It has to be a two-way street.

Ahmed takes a big drink of cocoa. Mary counts on her fingers.

MARY

There are friends.

No.

There are strangers.

And friends.

And good friends.

(Beat.)

And *almost* best friends.

And then best friends.

So you can be my almost best friends.

AHMED

That's not fair.

MARY

It is extremely fair.

Mary opens up the book. She is finished with this conversation. Ahmed stares her down.

AHMED

You know Lyla School costs money, right?

(Beat.)

Mary!

MARY

Let's go back to reading.

AHMED

The reason it's special.

Is because it costs money.

Pause.

AHMED

And the only reason you get to go here.

Is because your dad cuts the grass.

MARY

Well the only reason you get to go here is because you're a freak.

AHMED

I'm not a freak.

MARY

And because I said it was okay.

AHMED

Don't lie.

MARY

It's true!

Magda asked what you were like.

If I thought you would hurt anyone.

And I said no,

But I can always change my mind.

AHMED

Please stop lying.

MARY

I'm *not* lying.

You can ask her.

Ahmed opens his book violently. Mary goes back to her book. They read in silence for a while. Ahmed looks up from his book. He closes it. He frowns.

AHMED

I'm sorry.

Mary continues reading. Ahmed scoots his chair around so he is next to her. Very carefully, he opens his book and reads. A few moments of silence. She leans her head on his shoulder. A few moments in this.

"Orinoco Flow" by Enya brings us into...

The Barn. A group of chairs are set up strategically. Magda runs on, carrying a boom box.

MAGDA

Sailors, hurry!

Magda sets the boom box down. Mary and Ahmed run on, carrying a large sheet between them. Mikeal comes on, trailing Mary and Ahmed.

MAGDA
Poseidon is ANGRY!
We must HURRY!

As Magda delivers the rest of her speech, Mary and Ahmed run on and off with materials to construct the ship. The rest of the unseen class is with them. They use sheets to represent the ship, the sails, the water, the wind. Mikeal helps, but lets Mary and Ahmed build something first, then fixes it.

MAGDA
The wind is... furious!
What does it feel like?
What does it *taste* like?
Are you scared?
Where are your friends?
If you don't think about each one of your body parts.
They'll fly away.
Try to hold on.
Raise the sails!

Mary and Ahmed construct the sail. Mikeal fixes it.

MAGDA
The water.
Oh my!
There's a hole in the middle of the ocean.
You're swirling right into it.
We must hold on.
Sailors, we must steer this ship.
Away from the hole in the middle of ocean.

Ahmed and Mikeal use a blue sheet to represent the ocean. Mary stands on one of the chairs holding a large wooden steering wheel. She steers the boat.

MAGDA
Steer, sailors, steer!
We're getting sucked in.

Ahmed and Mikeal whip the blue sheet up and down furiously. Mary steers with more strength.

MAGDA

The rain is crashing down!
You're getting soaked.
And you're freezing.
The rain is so hard you can't see forward.
The rain is falling sideways.
You can't see straight.
Which way are you going?
Which way is home?

Mary and Ahmed throw buckets of water on each other.

Late afternoon. Approaching sundown.

Mary and Ahmed in Blanchard Woods. Ahmed looks worried. Mary rotates in a small circle, with her arms straight out.

MARY
North.
South.
East...
(She stops. She turns.)
No.
North.
South...
(She stops again. She looks up at the sky.)
This is stupid.

AHMED
It's getting dark.

MARY
Why isn't it just...?
Up.
Down.
This way.
That way.
People are dumb.

AHMED
It's getting cold.

MARY
I told you to bring a coat.

AHMED

It was warm before.

MARY

Let's try this way.

AHMED

They're going to leave without us.

MARY

This way feels right.

AHMED

We're going to die out here.

MARY

Magda says there's no such thing as lost.

(She whistles to herself.)

Magda says you just find a new place to be.

AHMED

Well that's stupid.

And this is all your fault.

MARY

I just wanted to show you.

AHMED

I thought you knew where to go.

MARY

I did.

AHMED

I thought you knew how to get back.

Beat.

MARY

I'm sorry.

You were having fun before.

AHMED

Before we were going to DIE.

MARY

You're CRAZY.

AHMED

I don't like it out here.

MARY

Are you scared of dying?

At least we'd be together.

And dying is just sleep.

Except you don't wake up.

(Beat.)

I'm going to lay down and die now?

Okay?

For practice.

AHMED

Don't.

Mary lies down. She closes her eyes. Ahmed watches her. He goes over to her.

AHMED

Hey!

No response. Ahmed whispers.

AHMED

Hey.

MARY

I'm dead, stupid.

AHMED

You're not being funny.

MARY

Aren't you sad?

Pause. Mary opens one eye.

MARY
Aren't you going to cry?

Ahmed smiles.

AHMED
Boo. Hoo. Hoo.

Ahmed chuckles to himself. Mary fights a smile.

AHMED
BOOOOO
Hoo Hoo.

Mary laughs.

AHMED
I can hear you laughing.

MARY
(Murmurs) No you can't.

AHMED
I can hear you gurgling.

MARY
Shut up, I'm dead.

AHMED
BOOO HOO HOOO.

Mary shoots up, wild-eyed.

MARY
BOOOO HOO HOOOOO

AHMED AND MARY
BOOOOOOOOO
HOOOOOOOO
HOOOOOOOO

They collapse on their backs, laughing. The laughter dies out. They lie together silently, pretending. They stay in this for their next exchange.

AHMED

What did you want to show me, anyways?

MARY

Nothing.

Just this spot.

I found with Lucas.

(Beat.)

It's the kissing spot.

AHMED

Oh.

Beat.

AHMED

I don't want it go get dark,

I want them to find us before then.

MARY

Yeah, but what if they don't?

(Beat.)

If you get scared, I'll be brave for both of us.

AHMED

I'm not scared.

MARY

Prove it.

Mary sits up. Ahmed stays down. Mary looks at him.

AHMED

You didn't kiss Lucas

MARY

Yes I did.

AHMED

There's no kissing spot.

MARY

Just because you don't know how!

AHMED

I can tell when you're lying.

MARY

Nope, ask Lucas.

AHMED

He lies too.

MARY

Ask Curtis.

Ask Ben.

AHMED

How come you're not friends with any of the girls?

MARY

Yes, I am.

AHMED

How come you're not friends with Georgia?

Or Leanne?

MARY

Her eyes are too big.

AHMED

Yeah, but that's just the way she looks.

MARY

No she doesn't have to make her eyes big like that all the time.

Beat.

MARY

Lucas said your house is weird.

AHMED

So what?

MARY
Nothing.

AHMED
I never wanted him to come over in the first place.
I don't like baseball and I don't like sports.
(Beat.)
At my old school, we did way more worksheets.

MARY
No worksheets here.
Much better?

AHMED
We used to get gold stars, though.
I miss the gold stars.

MARY
Oh, I'll make you one tomorrow, stupid.
I'll make you twenty damn stupid gold stars.

AHMED
Don't say "damn".

Magda enters a little frantic. She sees the kids. She makes the choice to relax. She takes a calming breath. They don't see her. She smiles.

MAGDA
Did you have a good adventure?

Mary and Ahmed see Magda. Very calmly, Mary walks to Magda and hugs her leg. Ahmed stays where he is. Mary is not ashamed. Ahmed is slightly ashamed.

MARY
Guess what we saw?
In the creek?

MAGDA
What?

MARY
(Excited) We saw...
(Mary stops. She very politely turns slightly to look at Ahmed.)

Ahmed, would you like to tell Magda what we saw in the creek?

Ahmed shakes his head.

MARY

Ahmed, are you sure?

Ahmed nods.

MARY

Well, okaaay...

MAGDA

Mary, I very much appreciate you giving Ahmed the chance to share.

Now go ahead and tell me.

And then we should get back.

MARY

We saw a brown speckled toad.

Like Lyla's eyes!

Remember Lyla's eyes?

MAGDA

Yes.

MARY

Maybe if I see the toad next time.

I can bring a camera.

And I can take a picture and put the picture on Lyla's board.

MAGDA

I think that would be very lovely.

MARY

Remember when you called me Lyla?

On accident?

We were doing Little Red.

(To Ahmed) You weren't here yet.

And I was wearing Lyla's sweatshirt, with the hood.

And you called me-

MAGDA

Yes, I remember.

MARY

I told Ahmed the thing about never being lost.
Is everyone waiting for us?

MAGDA

Ahmed, how far are we?
From Lyla School?

Ahmed stands.

AHMED

I dunno.

MAGDA

Why don't you take a guess?
It doesn't have to be right.
How far do you think you were walking?

Ahmed squints seriously. He thinks hard.

AHMED

Twenty miles.

MARY

That's what I was going to say!

Magda nods solemnly. She points to a spot in the distance.

MAGDA

An excellent guess.
You see that hill over there?

AHMED

Over there?

MAGDA

Yep.
I want you to walk to the top of that hill.
And tell me what you see.

Ahmed hesitates. Magda motions for him to go. Slowly, Ahmed walks up the hill. He sees something. He squints. His face lights up.

AHMED
MARY!!!

Mary runs over to Ahmed. She looks.

MARY
OH MY GOD IT'S THE BARN!

AHMED
I KNOW, THE BARN!

MARY
I CAN'T BELIEVE-!

AHMED
I CAN'T BELIEVE WE WERE THIS CLOSE!

MARY
WE WERE THIS CLOSE THE WHOLE TIME!
CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

They run back to Magda. Magda smiles.

MAGDA
Home is closer than we think.
Yes?

Mary hugs Magda. She separates.

MARY
(To Ahmed) C'mon, I'll race you.

MAGDA
Go on ahead, Mary.
I want to talk to your pal.

MARY
Whatever, I'll race myself.

Mary runs off. Pause.

AHMED

I'm sorry we got lost.
Or thought we got lost.
You can give us time-out.
Or just me.
It was more my fault.

MAGDA
Did you have fun?
On your adventure?

AHMED
Yeah.
(Beat.)
It was an adventure until I got scared.

MAGDA
Ahmed, we have not known each other very long.
And I look forward to knowing you better.
(Beat.)
But there's something I want to say.
If you'd like to hear it.

Ahmed nods.

MAGDA
I think you are a very serious and very quiet and very thoughtful young man.
Is that true?

Ahmed shrugs.

MAGDA
Well, let me tell you a little secret.
Those are my favorite kind of people.
That's how I was.
When I was your age.

AHMED
Really?

MAGDA
Yep.
And my husband, Mikeal.
My best friend.

He's just like that.
Quiet.
Sometimes entire nights will go by.
He'll sit with me.
And not say a word.

AHMED
He's probably thinking about the universe.

MAGDA
Yes, he probably is.
(Beat. Magda smiles.)
But Ahmed.
As you get older.
People might not understand.
People might tell you things like.
"Don't be so quiet."
Or people will say.
"Smile more."
And the thing I want to tell you is.
Those people are fools.

AHMED
Okay.

MAGDA
I'm so glad you're at our school.
Our school is better because you are here.

Beat. Magda squeezes his shoulder. Ahmed lets her.

Magda exits. We transition back to adulthood. Ahmed puts on his bloody clothes. He waits outside the bar. He looks around. Mary enters, bloody clothes on.

AHMED
I thought you were going to the bathroom.

MARY
I did.

AHMED
Out here?

MARY
I don't like public restrooms.

AHMED
Oh, Mary.

MARY
What?

AHMED
Mary that's so weird.

MARY
No, it's not.
(*Beat.*)
C'mon don't you have stuff like that?

AHMED
Stuff?

MARY
You know.
Weird stuff.
Stuff no one understands.
(*Beat.*)
It's okay if you do.

AHMED
I know.

MARY
You must have *something*.
You can tell me.

AHMED
No.
I don't.
(*Beat.*)
Sorry.

MARY
We should go.

AHMED

Yeah.

I don't want to.

MARY

Ahmed-

AHMED

I don't want to see her.

MARY

But you came this far.

We almost made it.

(Beat.)

Oh hey, so, there's this game.

AHMED

Yeah?

MARY

There's this game I've wanted to play with you for twenty years.

AHMED

What kind of game?

MARY

Something I do.

When I can't fall asleep.

When it's really bad.

And my heart's all jumpy.

How I calm down.

I think about...

What would Lucas be like?

Now

You know?

If he was still alive.

Pause. Ahmed is uncomfortable.

MARY

And.

What would Curtis be like?

If he was still alive.

AHMED

Stop.

MARY

And Ben.

Would Ben have a family?

I bet Leanne would be one of those people who thinks she's gonna be like a famous writer or an artist or a dancer like all through high school people would tell her "you're so good" but she's not *really* that good and then she'd end up having some boring job, but she'd like, have all these stupid hobbies.

AHMED

Mary, stop it!

MARY

Jeez, what's the big deal?

AHMED

I don't want to talk about this.

MARY

Oh.

Okay.

Then what would you like to talk about?

(Beat.)

Can you believe this weather we're having?

Pause. Mary grabs Ahmed, over the top excited. She grabs him really rough.

MARY

I SAID:

CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS WEATHER WE'RE HAVING?

LOOK, AHMED.

LOOK AT THE WEATHER.

ISN'T IT AMAZING?

YOU KNOW, EVERY MORNING I WAKE UP AND THINK

I BET TODAY'S GONNNA BE THE DAY WHEN WE FINALLY DON'T HAVE ANY WEATHER

BUT I'M ALWAYS WRONG.

THE WEATHER JUST KEEPS COMING

ISN'T IT AMAZING

ISN'T IT GREAT?

AHMED

Get *off*!

He shakes her off, a little violent. A beat as she recovers.

MARY

Why did you come?

If you don't want to talk?

Why even bother?

Ahmed sits on the curb. Mary glares at him. A long pause.

AHMED

Lucas would be a cop.

Beat. Then, Mary breaks into a wide smiles, joins Ahmed on the curb.

MARY

Lucas would *totally* be a cop.

AHMED

He'd be one of those guys who's always kind of a jerk, kind of an asshole, but not particularly bright, and one day the light bulb would go on: "I know! I'll be a cop!"

MARY

You're so right.

Beat.

MARY

What's it like being a dad?

AHMED

It's great.

MARY

Wow that was really convincing.

AHMED

No, it is.

It's great.

(Beat.)

And it's terrible.

(Beat.)

The baby was a surprise.

The baby was unexpected.

(Beat.)

This has been really good.

MARY

Yeah it has.

AHMED

I always thought about.

What it would be like to see you.

And now I know.

MARY

Am I everything you hoped for and more?

Beat.

AHMED

I think this is as far as I go.

MARY

Oh.

Okay.

AHMED

I can't go back

Back to The Barn.

Not tonight.

(Beat.)

Tell Magda I'm sorry.

MARY

I will.

Neither of them move. A good long pause.

MARY

Ahmed, we have to go.

AHMED

I know.

MARY

We have to go back.

We transition back into childhood. The bloody clothes come off.

The Barn. Candles all around. A soft song on the boom box.

Magda and Mikeal enter. Magda lights some incense. The rest of the unseen class is present. Magda finishes with the incense.

Throughout this scene, Magda addresses an unseen figure. This is her son, MATTHEW. Matthew is not physically on stage, but he is present. People touch him. Matthew has an unhealthy, uneasy energy surrounding him. Something is not right.

Mikeal leans over somewhat awkwardly across the circle and squeezes Magda's arm. He grins at her. She smiles at him. She takes a deep breath. Like she is beginning a religious ceremony.

MAGDA

We are here today.

To talk about the name of our school.

Pause.

MAGDA

Why do we talk about fear?

And sadness?

And anger?

Why don't we talk about happy things?

Happy things all the time.

Pause. Quietly and gently, Magda clears her throat.

MAGDA

Lyla was a very brave and very curious little girl.

She had hair like sunflowers.

Eyes like a speckled toad.

Lyla loved the water and the air and the night.

But she didn't like going to sleep.

I know there was a time...

(Beat. Magda smiles.)

She must have had all her teeth at one point.

But when I remember her smile, there's always holes in it.

(Beat.)

Sometimes Lyla made me angry.

She didn't understand about indoor and outdoor voices.

Occasionally,

She said cruel things.

Things she didn't mean.

Like all little girls.

But most of the time, she made me proud and happy and bewildered.

MARY

What does bewildered mean?

MAGDA

In the school play, she was Willy Wonka.

(Magda laughs.)

Her favorite song was "What a Wonderful World".

(Small beat.)

I miss her.

Matthew, is there anything you would like to say?

Magda looks to Matthew. Mikeal tries to shift into a more comfortable position on the floor.

MIKEAL

I did not meet Lyla.

I did not speak to her.

Or shake her hand.

Or share her smile with the holes.

And yet, I know her.

I know her through my partner, Magda.

Whom I love very much.

I know her through photographs.

Through wonderful memories.

And through this school.

Which honors her life.

MAGDA

Thank you, Mikeal.

Matthew?

Please?

No response. Magda stares at Matthew, waiting for him to say something. He doesn't.

MAGDA

For Lyla's eighth birthday.
We went to the lake.
Lyla loved to swim.
Matthew, do you remember?
Was it warm or cold that day?

No response.

MAGDA

It was actually quite cold.
I remember wind whips and goose bumps.
Ripples in the water.
But it was Lyla's birthday and she wanted to swim.
Matthew, remember you said you would go with her?
The adults were cold.
And tired.
You said you would help.

No response.

MAGDA

Would you like to share any memories?

Magda moves closer to Matthew. She puts a hand on his shoulder. This is hard for her. It is not natural for her to touch her son.

MAGDA

We all know that Matthew tried his very best.
We know that maybe.
They went a little too deep.
That Lyla was a little too brave.
But we know that Matthew tried his very best.

Beat. Magda takes her hand off Matthew's shoulder.

MAGDA

Children, when you choose to love something.
You're making a deal with your heart.
You agree that at some point.

You might lose the thing you love.
And that will most certainly make your heart hurt.

MARY

(Solemn) I loved my hamster, Rufus.
When he died.
I almost cried.
But I didn't.

MAGDA

Thank you, Mary.

Magda once again places her hand on Matthew's hand. She tries to get physically closer to him, but it is difficult.

MAGDA

Please share a memory.

Pause. No response. Tension builds.

MAGDA

I remember you two used to fight.
I remember when we brought Lyla home you said you hated her.
You told us to bring her back to the hospital.

Magda laughs, but it's not funny. Pause.

MAGDA

You used to wrestle.
You got too rough.
She had a scar on the back of her head.
When she got a haircut, you could see.

Suddenly, Matthew makes some kind of violent move to Magda. He shakes her off? He strikes her? He pushes her back, away from him? It is a big move, a scary move.

A long tense silence. Magda on the floor, cowering. Mikeal tries to touch Matthew, but Matthew shakes him off. More silence.

Finally, Mary walks over to Matthew and sits next to him. Ahmed walks over to the other side, so there is a space between them where Matthew would be. Mary takes Matthew's hand. Ahmed takes the other one. They all three hold hands.

The adults exit, the candles go out.

Mary and Ahmed in The Library. They eat French Fries and work on a mural. Mary stuffs French Fries in her mouth.

AHMED

Don't forget to chew.

MARY

Shut up and draw.

Ahmed searches for a red crayon. He finds it and starts drawing aggressively.

MARY

Not so hard, you'll rip the paper.

AHMED

Red eye is the scariest.

MARY

We have to finish for the carnival.

AHMED

It's two kinds of red now.

MARY

Remember when you got scared?

Of Mikeal in the mask?

Ahmed doesn't respond. He keeps drawing. Mary joins him in the drawing.

AHMED

Stay in the lines.

MARY

Isn't it weird, or funny, that some people get scared and other people don't? Like I never get scared?

AHMED

Yes you do.

MARY

No-

AHMED
Everyone-

MARY
I have never been scared. I don't even know what it feels like.

She takes a big bite of French fries. Ahmed stops drawing and looks at her.

AHMED
Do you always get extra food?

MARY
(Mouth full) No.

AHMED
I'm full from lunch.

MARY
(Still full) I'm still hungry.

AHMED
You should tell your dad to make a bigger lunch.

MARY
Hey, you know that story about Lyla?

Beat.

AHMED
Uh-hmm.

MARY
Magda tells that story every year.
With those same lights and that same music.
It wasn't an accident, though.
Magda lies and Mikeal lies and everyone just lies because then it's way less sad.

AHMED
What are you talking about?

MARY
Matthew did it on purpose.

But Magda would never say that.

Magda enters.

MAGDA

Mr. Ahmed. Late pick-up?

AHMED

It's Tuesday.

MAGDA

Right, Tuesday.

AHMED

Magda, look.

MARY

Don't show off.

MAGDA

Can you go see Mikeal?

For a special project?

AHMED

Both of us?

MAGDA

Just you, Mr. Ahmed.

AHMED

What kind of project?

MAGDA

Something to do with the universe...

Ahmed bolts up runs off. Mary continues coloring, oblivious. Magda carefully sits down next to her.

MAGDA

Beautiful, Mary.

MARY

Thanks.

She continues coloring, Magda watches.

MAGDA
Sweetheart, can you stop?

MARY
I'm almost done.

MAGDA
Just for a minute.

Mary continues coloring. After a few moments she stops.

MARY
Done.

MAGDA
O-kay.

MARY
(*She starts again*)
Oh, just one-

MAGDA
Mary, I need you to look at me now.

Something clicks. She stops.

MARY
Can you tell which part this is?

MAGDA
Sure, it's the Cyclops.

MARY
And it's good.

MAGDA
It's very good.

Mary starts coloring again.

MARY
What happened?

MAGDA
An accident.

MARY
Oh, is it bad?

MAGDA
He's gonna be fine.

MARY
But he's in trouble again.

MAGDA
Your dad needs some help.
We're going to...
We need to make some arrangements.

MARY
Excuse me, I forgot something in my cubby.

MAGDA
Mary.

Mary tries to run off. Magda stands up. Mary stops.

MARY
Am I kicked out?

Magda shakes her head.

MARY
I didn't do anything.

Magda nods. Mary turns to face her.

MARY
Did he hurt himself?

MAGDA
It was an accident.

MARY
Is he going to get fired now?

MAGDA
He's just sick, Mary.

MARY
But not sick like the flu, right?

MAGDA
Right.

MARY
If he gets fired.
No more Lyla School.
For me.

MAGDA
All we can do is offer our help. And our love. But there comes a point... if that love is not accepted.
(Beat.)
You will always be welcome at this school.

MARY
I was thinking. If dad is still sick. And I know you have an extra room, in your house, because of Lyla.

Beat. Mary searches for an answer. Magda reveals nothing.

MARY
And I can be friends with Matthew. Cuz he doesn't really have friends, right? And I'm good at cleaning and I'm quiet. Sometimes.
And then my dad will be better.

Pause. Mary's face falls; Magda takes a step towards her.

MAGDA
You will always be welcome at this school.

MARY
Oh I'm sorry, you're right, that was a dumb idea.

MAGDA
Mary, I...

MARY
That idea makes no sense.

MAGDA
Mary, I want to be
Honest
And open with you.
(Magda pauses, collects herself.)
So many times.
You make feel great.
Like the sky.
Seeing you smile.
And how nice you are with Ahmed.
You're the most special person to me.
I have to say something difficult.
Sometimes... looking at you
Looking at your face.
Sometimes that makes me feel a lot of pain.

MARY
But I can't help my face!

MAGDA
Sometimes it even makes me angry.
We can't control how we are. Sometimes I have to turn away. You are so special to me.
Sometimes I can't even look at you.

MARY
Stop.

MAGDA
You are not my child.
(Magda steels herself.)
I want to speak.
And I want you to listen.
We can have the most fun.
And be the best of friends.

MARY
Ahmed is my best friend.

MAGDA

There are so many wonderful
Parts of the world.
The universe.
So many things
I want to share with you.
But my child is gone.
Lyla is gone.

Mary is frozen with shock for a moment. Then she starts nodding rapidly. Then she walks away. Magda watches her go. She exits.

Spring Carnival. Mikeal looks through a telescope. Ahmed enters, sits down next to Mikeal.

MIKEAL

Are you enjoying the party?

Ahmed shrugs.

MIKEAL

Don't you want to dunk Magda?

Ahmed shrugs.

MIKEAL

The mural is very beautiful.
Which part did you paint?

AHMED

Cyclops.
And part of the Sirens.

MIKEAL

You're a very skilled artist.

AHMED

Mary isn't coming?

Pause.

MIKEAL

Do you know what I'm doing?
I'm looking for Jupiter.

AHMED
The one with the ring?
Shit, that's Saturn.

MIKEAL
Ahmed!

AHMED
Sorry.

MIKEAL
Those words are so ugly.

AHMED
It's Mary.
She-

MIKEAL
No.
Not-

AHMED
Sorry.

MIKEAL
Do you want to look?

Ahmed nods. Mikeal lets him look.

MIKEAL
Mary is with her father tonight.

AHMED
Because he's sick?

MIKEAL
Yes.

AHMED
But then he'll get better.

MIKEAL

Tell me what you see.

AHMED

And then she'll come back.

(Beat. He looks through the telescope.)

I don't know.

Maybe.

Something bright.

Something.

I think.

MIKEAL

You're having fun?

AHMED

No.

MIKEAL

All your friends are here.

AHMED

Mary's my friend.

Hey, do you ever get scared?

Looking at the universe?

MIKEAL

How do you mean, scared?

AHMED

You know.

Like, if gravity stops working.

MIKEAL

Yes.

Right.

AHMED

And I have this nightmare?

(Pause. Ahmed looks up from the telescope and looks at Mikeal.)

I'm on a spaceship

In space.

And a door on the spaceship opens all of a sudden, and I fall out.
And I'm floating.
And I know I'm going to die.
(*Beat. Ahmed leans forward.*)
The earth spins, you know?

MIKEAL
Hmmm.

AHMED
So, even though it doesn't feel like it.
It feels like the ground is flat and the sky is still,
But we're actually spinning, the whole time.
Sometimes that makes me feel scared.
(*Ahmed looks back through the telescope.*)
How come you stopped wanting to study the universe?
Did you get bored?

MIKEAL
Well, Ahmed.
It's not so much I stopped wanting.
I worked for many years.
At a university.

AHMED
But how come you stopped?

MIKEAL
I stopped when I met Magda.
(*Beat.*)
I was fifty-three years old and incredibly lonely.
I always wanted children.
It never happened for me.
I thought that I would enjoy working at Lyla School.

AHMED
And you do like it?

MIKEAL
Very much.

AHMED
And now you have a kid.

Kind of.
Matthew.
You have a son.

MIKEAL
Yes.

AHMED
A rotten one.
(Beat.)
Sorry.
(Beat.)
I'm glad I met you.

MIKEAL
I'm glad I met you too.

AHMED
Is this Jupiter?

Ahmed looks up from the telescope. Mikeal looks through it.

MIKEAL
Yes.
You found it.

Ahmed frowns.

AHMED
Mary will come back.

Ahmed looks to Mikeal for confirmation. Mikeal looks through the telescope.

MIKEAL
When I was a boy.
My mother was very sick.

AHMED
Did she die?

MIKEAL
She spent almost all of her time in hospital.
Sometimes I would visit, but she didn't recognize me.

So do you know what I did?

AHMED

What?

Mikeal looks at Ahmed.

MIKEAL

I began writing her letters.

Even if she didn't read them.

I wrote every day.

Without fail.

And I knew

In my heart.

They would reach her somehow.

AHMED

Mary will come back.

MIKEAL

Ahmed, why don't you write her a letter?

Mikeal smiles kindly, picks up the telescope, pats Ahmed on the shoulder and exits.

Magda enters wearing a witch hat. The rest of the unseen class is present. Ahmed sits huddled on the floor. Magda approaches him, cautiously.

MAGDA

So, we've got ourselves in quite a mess.

Haven't we?

Look around Mr. Ahmed.

Beat. Ahmed doesn't respond. Magda points out other members of the class.

MAGDA

Georgia is a goat.

Curtis is a three-toed sloth.

Lucas is...

(Magda waits for a moment for Lucas to remind her.)

Yes!

Right!

I've turned Lucas into a Kangaroo!

We thought we were just having snack time.

But I cursed the apples
With terrible dark magic.

AHMED
I ate the snacks.

MAGDA
What, Mr. Ahmed?

AHMED
How come I'm still human?
I ate the snacks too.

Beat. Good question. Magda adjusts.

MAGDA
How are you going to change your friends back? How do you get us out of this mess?

AHMED
Someone else can do it.

MAGDA
No.

AHMED
Leanne's raising her hand.

MAGDA
Leanne is a mongoose.
(Beat.)
We have to get off this island.
And we're running out of time.

AHMED
I don't want to play.

MAGDA
If you can't solve this problem, your friends will stay animals forever. They'll never make it home. They'll never see their families again. They'll be stranded on this island forever. We desperately need your help.

Magda gets an idea, runs to a box with crayons. She scribbles quickly on a piece of paper, brings it to Ahmed.

MAGDA

For you, Mr. Ahmed.

A simple incantation.

Say these words and the spell is broken.

You save all of your friends.

Magda holds out the paper. Ahmed does not take it.

MAGDA

Ahmed, say the words.

Ahmed doesn't take it.

MAGDA

Say the words and then we'll take a break.

He doesn't take it. Magda forces out a laugh.

MAGDA

Your animal friends are getting restless.

AHMED

They're not really animals.

MAGDA

Yes, but-

AHMED

It's not real-

MAGDA

(Surprising anger) Ahmed, you're being difficult on purpose.

Beat. Ahmed looks around.

AHMED

They're not my friends.

And I'm not saying the stupid prayer.

And they can stay on Circe's Island forever.

And I don't care.

MAGDA

You don't mean that.

AHMED

They can stay here and die!

Ahmed storms off. End of activity. Magda chases him down.

MAGDA

No, Mr. Ahmed, you do not walk away from me.
That is not how this works.

Ahmed keeps walking.

MAGDA

Do I need to make a phone call?

Ahmed stops. Turns back, eerily calm.

AHMED

Yes, that's fine.

MAGDA

We're gonna call dad?

AHMED

Call dad.

MAGDA

I'm sure he's very busy.

AHMED

He'll come.

MAGDA

He won't be happy about leaving work.

AHMED

He'll come, cuz he's scared.

Pause.

AHMED

You're just like my old teachers.

MAGDA
Ahmed, why would he be scared?

Beat.

AHMED
I got mad.

MAGDA
You did.

AHMED
I got mad like I used to.

Beat.

MAGDA
Ahmed, you are safe here.

AHMED
Yeah, I know.

MAGDA
No one would ever hurt you here.

AHMED
My dad would be scared about the other kids.

Beat.

AHMED
Um-

MAGDA
I know you miss your friend.

AHMED
Not that bad.

MAGDA
I know that it doesn't seem fair.

AHMED

Can I ask you a question?

(Beat.)

Mary said.

Before she left.

She said it wasn't an accident.

Pause.

AHMED

Lyla?

In the water?

She said Matthew might have, maybe Matthew did it on purpose.

Pause.

AHMED

Um, is that true?

MAGDA

I'm calling now.

She starts to go, turns back, walks briskly to Ahmed.

MAGDA

When you say that?

(Beat.)

You know that hurts.

AHMED

No.

MAGDA

When you say that about my son.

Ahmed, yes you know.

Your heart is too kind for you not to know that.

Ahmed stands his ground.

MAGDA

You have other friends.

Lucas and-

AHMED

I don't like anyone else.

MAGDA

You will.

AHMED

I hate Lucas.

MAGDA

I'm calling.

Ahmed pushes past her. Stops.

AHMED

I hope he comes soon.

I hope he drives away fast.

I hope I never come back here.

Magda exits. Ahmed remains on stage. Mikeal enters. He brings on a Greek Sailor costume for Ahmed. He dresses Ahmed in the costume, piece by piece. He finishes and exits.

Magda re-enters and speaks to the unseen class.

MAGDA

Sailors, brave and resourceful.

The mission is simple.

Find your way home.

But of course.

Simple is not the same as easy.

At every turn.

Monsters.

Sirens.

Gods, powerful and vengeful.

You must be smart.

Careful.

Fearless.

You must make it home

You have your map.

You have your partner.

Work together.

Make your way through.

We end right here.
In The Barn.
The final task.
Defeat the Cyclops.
Do not leave school grounds.
Stay with your partner.
Find your way home.
(Beat.)
Good luck.

Ahmed fiddles with his costume. Mary enters and watches him for a few seconds. He turns and sees her. They look at each other.

MARY
It's crooked.

Silently, Ahmed fixes his costume. He turns away.

MARY
Are you mad at me?

AHMED
No.

MARY
I'm back now.
I'm your partner.

Beat.

MARY
Are we even still friends?

Beat.

MARY
I'm back.

AHMED
You never even said bye.

MARY
Hey, Ahmed.

Pause. Ahmed refuses to look at her.

MARY

It's nice your dad is nice to you.
All the time.
Nice for you.

AHMED

It's not all perfect.

Beat.

MARY

I'm sorry I didn't say bye.

(Beat.)

I didn't want to be at Lyla School anymore.

AHMED

You could come see me at my house.

MARY

No I couldn't.

AHMED

We'd be friends even if we didn't go to school.

We're not best friends because of school

We're best friends because we're best friends.

Mary doesn't answer.

MARY

Mikeal said you wrote me a letter, but he didn't want to give it to me unless you wanted me to see it. Do you want me to see it?

(Beat.)

Ahmed?

AHMED

I didn't write a letter.

MARY

Oh. Mikeal said.

AHMED
He was lying.

MARY
Oh.

AHMED
If you're just going to leave whenever you want and don't say bye then I don't want to be friends.

MARY
All right.

Pause. Ahmed finally turns to face Mary.

AHMED
Is your dad okay?

MARY
I'll say goodbye
If I have to leave again.
I'll say goodbye this time.
(Beat.)
So we'll be partners.

AHMED
Yeah, partners.

MARY
Did you see Lucas and Curtis are partners?

AHMED
(Smiles) They won't make it.

MARY
They're too stupid!

AHMED
They won't make it to the Cyclops.
They won't make it home.
(Beat.)
Let's do the first task.

MARY

No, what if we went to Blanchard Woods?

Beat.

MARY

It's not very far.

AHMED

We'd miss it.

MARY

Just the first part.

AHMED

We're not allowed to leave.

MARY

Yeah, but then it could be just me and you for a bit before everyone else.

(Beat.)

And plus, I want to show you something.

Beat. Ahmed shrugs. Mary takes Ahmed's hand and they walk together.

Blanchard Woods. Mary leads Ahmed through the woods.

AHMED

We're going too far.

MARY

Just a little more.

AHMED

We'll get lost again.

MARY

Just a little farther....

(Beat. Mary stops.)

Here.

Beat. Ahmed looks around, confused. Mary nods confidently.

MARY
We're here.

AHMED
Where?

MARY
This is the kissing spot.

AHMED
Oh.

Beat.

MARY
Isn't it nice?

AHMED
You came here with Lucas?

MARY
Uh-huh.
(*Beat.*)
Well, no.

AHMED
Ha!

MARY
That wasn't all the way the truth.

AHMED
I knew it!
I knew you never...!

MARY
So what, Ahmed?
So what?

Beat. Ahmed doesn't know what to say.

AHMED
What do you want to do?

MARY
I don't know.

Beat.

AHMED
We could go back.

MARY
Yeah, we should go back.

Pause. Mary walks to Ahmed. She takes his head in her hands and plants one on him. This is a mashing of lips more than actual kissing. They separate.

MARY
Have you ever done that before?

Ahmed shakes his head.

MARY
I don't think we did it right.

Ahmed shrugs, blushes. They stand together, barely touching.

AHMED
If we go back now.
If we go to The Barn.
We can make it for The Cyclops.

MARY
Okay.
Then.
Let's go.

Mary puts out her hand. Ahmed takes it. They exit.

END OF SECOND MOVEMENT

THIRD MOVEMENT

A figure wearing a Cyclops mask sits in a chair, center stage. Shrouded in darkness, perfectly still. A few moments of the figure alone on stage.

Ahmed and Mary enter, a little drunk. They wear the bloody clothes. They are holding hands. They stop when they see the Cyclops. Tense silence. They look at each other.

AHMED

You go.

MARY

No, you.

Silence. Ahmed takes a step forward. He looks back at Mary. He takes another step.

He doesn't want to go.

He forces himself. He approaches the figure. He reaches for the mask.

He stops. Steps back.

AHMED

Take off the mask.

MARY

Ahmed...

AHMED

I'm not doing this.

We're not doing this.

The Cyclops doesn't move. Ahmed shakes his head, goes to exit. Mary grabs his arm as he walks past her.

MARY

Hey.

Wait.

AHMED

Are you serious?

(Beat.)

This isn't going to work.

MARY

How do you know?

AHMED

This isn't going to make anything better.

Mary.

I promise you.

We're not ten-years-old anymore.

Ahmed turns to the Cyclops.

AHMED

You think we're gonna play a little game?

Play pretend?

And then everything will be okay?

It doesn't work like that.

Ahmed turns to Mary for backup. Mary considers the Cyclops and then turns back to Ahmed.

MARY

Was it warm or cold that day?

Beat.

MARY

Ahmed, was it-?

AHMED

Oh, Jesus.

MARY

Was it warm or cold that day?

AHMED

You know what?

How about we just skip right to the end.

MARY

Okay.

AHMED

It'll save us all some time

MARY

All right, then.

Go ahead.

(Beat.)

Skip to the end.

Pause. Ahmed sits down, huddles into his position on the floor, a mirror of the childhood scenes. A good long moment in this

MARY

Ahmed.

Beat. Mary sits down next to Ahmed. More silence.

MARY

(Quiet) Ahmed.

AHMED

It was in between.

(Beat.)

You put a sweater on.

And it's too warm.

But you take it off

MARY

And it's too cold.

(Beat.)

I had just come back.

Remember?

Mary smiles.

MARY

You were happy to see me.

AHMED

I was mad at you.

MARY

I came back to Lyla School.

You were mad at *first*.

(Beat.)

I missed you so much.

AHMED

I missed you too.

(Beat.)

We were partners.

We were suppose to go from Island to Island.

With everyone else.

Collecting pebbles.

Or magic coins

We had a map.

Remember?

MARY

We went to Blanchard Woods.

AHMED

And The Final Task.

Was the Island of the Cyclops.

It was supposed to end in here.

MARY

But we went to Blanchard Woods instead.

I want to talk about Blanchard Woods.

Beat.

MARY

I took you to the kissing spot.

AHMED

Which wasn't actually real, by the way.

MARY

It was real.

AHMED

You completely made it up.

Hey, who was your first kiss?

MARY
You were.

AHMED
No, I mean like your real first kiss.

MARY
You, Ahmed
You.
(Beat.)
We could have just stayed.
We could have stayed out there forever.

AHMED
But we didn't.

Beat.

AHMED
Mary, we didn't.

MARY
I know.

AHMED
We walked back.

Beat. They both stand up.

AHMED
And I knew something was wrong.
Before the barn, even.
I think I *smelled* something.
Or my stomach felt weird?

MARY
It was too quiet.

AHMED
Maybe we-

MARY
Maybe we were gone longer than we thought.

AHMED
I just-
If we made it to The Barn.
Everyone would be there.

MARY
Lucas. And Curtis.

AHMED
Georgia and Leanne.

MARY
We were supposed to make it back

AHMED
“Sailors, brave and resourceful.”

MARY
But we never really did.
Did we?

AHMED
“Find your way home.”

MARY
And then...

They both turn to face the Cyclops. They take a step forward. They stop.

AHMED
How come it was me?

MARY
I don't know.

AHMED
You were the brave one.

MARY

This time it was you.

Beat.

MARY

Go.

Please.

Ahmed.

Ahmed takes a deep breath. He walks to the Cyclops.

He takes off the mask to reveal Magda. Magda's face is streaked with tears. Ahmed holds the mask.

AHMED

But it wasn't you under there.

Was it?

MAGDA

No.

AHMED

It wasn't you at all.

Ahmed drops the mask.

MAGDA

Ahmed, please keep going.

AHMED

No!

Don't do that.

MAGDA

We're nearly there.

AHMED

Don't talk to me like I'm a child.

MARY

Yeah, Magda we're grown-ups now.

Beat.

AHMED

What is that you used to say about fear?
What was that lie you told?

MAGDA

Fear is a little fence.

AHMED

Yeah.

MARY

A little fence to jump over.

AHMED

Except that's pretty much nonsense, right?
Except that's not true at all.

MAGDA

I-

AHMED

Stop.
No.
Stop talking.

Pause. Ahmed carefully places the Cyclops mask down on the ground.

AHMED

We thought we'd made it.
The island of the Cyclops.

(Beat.)

And I walked over.
Like a brave little animal.
I took off the mask.

(Beat.)

And it was Mikeal.
Mouth cut open.
Streaks of blood.
But it wasn't that.
That wasn't the worst part.

Ahmed turns to Mary. She walks up next to Ahmed.

MARY

No, it was the eyes.

She walks to Magda and puts her hands over Magda's eyes.

MARY

Matthew gouged his eyes out.

He took them out clean.

So it was just the holes left.

And I looked in.

And it was the darkest thing I ever saw.

Beat. Mary turns back, mimicking her position from the prologue. Ahmed joins her.

MARY

And then Matthew.

Mary and Ahmed shield themselves from the imagined shot. They turn back forwards. They look around.

MARY

And then everyone else.

AHMED

Yes.

(Beat.)

And then everyone else.

Magda starts to stand. Mary puts her hand on Magda's shoulder.

MARY

Fear's just a little fence, Magda.

Beat. Magda sits back down.

MARY

Hey, can I ask you something?

(Beat.)

When are you going to say sorry?

MAGDA

Excuse me?

MARY

Oh.

I just mean.

When are you going to apologize?

For what happened?

(Beat.)

Because you never did.

Right after.

You said.

“Are you okay?”

“Are you hurt?”

You said.

“What a terrible thing.”

AHMED

Terrible.

MARY

But you never really said sorry.

MAGDA

Because it wasn't my fault.

MARY

Of course it was your fault.

MAGDA

You think this has been easy for me?

MARY

I'm not sure it's your turn to speak.

MAGDA

These years?

This town?

They-

MARY

Let's make sure everyone gets a chance.

MAGDA

They *torture* me.

(Beat.)

I get phone calls in the middle of the night.
They knock out my windows.
Twenty years later.
I'm still the wicked witch.
The angel of death.
So if you came here to hurt me.
I'm afraid there's not much left.
My heart's been broken, children.
I can promise you that.
Broken for good.

AHMED
So leave.

MAGDA
I can't!
I don't!
I don't have anywhere to go.

A pause. Mary puts a hand on Magda's shoulder.

MARY
You know what happened.
With Mathew and Lyla.

MAGDA
No!

MARY
You always knew.
Deep down in your heart.
Everyone knew.
It wasn't an accident.
But you decided to pretend.

MAGDA
Stop it.

MARY
And you built a school to make believe.
You wanted to make believe that
Your son didn't drown your daughter.

It was an all accident.
So you decided.

AHMED
Hey...

MARY
Let's pretend Matthew isn't evil.
Okay?
Let's pretend he's good.
Let's pretend it's okay for him
To be around a school.

MAGDA
Please don't say his name.

MARY
To be around kids.
It's all fine.
We'll all pretend.

MAGDA
Please!
(Beat. Magda chokes back tears.)
I loved every single one of those children.

MARY
Uh-huh, yeah, I know you did
We loved you too.
But you didn't protect us.
(Beat.)
You couldn't keep us safe.
And you promised you would.
So you lied.
(Beat.)
I didn't come here to hurt you.
But you have to say you're sorry.
You have to, Magda.
And we're not pretending now.
We're not playing a game.
We're three adults.
We're all in pain.
You have to apologize.

(Beat.)

Ahmed, is there anything you'd like to say?

Beat. Mary and Magda face Ahmed.

AHMED

I think I need to throw up.

Ahmed exits. Mary continues to stare at Magda. A long moment in this.

We transform into Blanchard Woods. A beautiful, clear night sky. Filled with stars.

Ahmed lies on his back, looking at the stars. His carry-on bag is next to him. After a few moments, Mary enters.

AHMED

How is she?

Mary doesn't answer.

AHMED

How are you?

MARY

I'm gonna stay.

AHMED

Oh.

MARY

Just for a few days.

AHMED

That's good.

MARY

She needs me.

AHMED

Yeah.

MARY

She really needs me.

AHMED

You know, I would too, it's just-

MARY

No.

AHMED

I have to get back.

MARY

You have to get back to your family.

Mary lays down next to Ahmed. They look at the stars together.

AHMED

Hey, you want to hear a riddle?

MARY

Sure, I love jokes.

AHMED

No, riddles are different.

MARY

How?

AHMED

A riddle is like a joke without an answer.

Or the answer is obscured.

MARY

Hmmm...

AHMED

Are you ready?

Beat. Mary nods.

AHMED

Okay. So.

You're holding your newborn son.

And your son won't stop crying.

MARY
Oh god.

AHMED
What?

MARY
Is this one of those riddles with like a “hidden meaning?”

AHMED
Just listen.
(Beat.)
Your son is crying.
Won’t stop.
It’s pounding in your head.
You feel like he’s scared.
Really scared.
So, how do you get him to stop crying?

Pause.

AHMED
That’s the riddle.

MARY
You comfort him.

AHMED
Right.

MARY
See, there, I solved the riddle.
You say...
“Everything will be all right.”

AHMED
Everything will be all right.

MARY
(Getting excited)
Yeah.
Yeah!

You say everything will be all right.
And then he stops crying.

AHMED

Okay, that's good.
Except you're not allowed to lie.

Pause.

AHMED

That's the trick.

MARY

You're not allowed to lie?

AHMED

Yeah.

So.

You can't say:

"Everything will be all right."

When really, deep down.

You know that it won't.

MARY

Hmmm.

Beat,

MARY

That's tough.

(Beat. Mary turns over to face Ahmed.)

Okay.

I got one.

A man is found dead.

On the floor.

He's lying in a puddle of water-

AHMED

Stabbed with an icicle.

MARY

Damn it!

Beat. Ahmed grins at Mary

MARY
What's his name?
Your son?

AHMED
Aasim.

MARY
Wow.

AHMED
It means "Protector."

MARY
Wow.
(*Beat.*)
Wow.

Beat.

AHMED
I sleep with the light on.

MARY
What?

AHMED
My bedroom has a dimmer.
My wife is a saint.
I can never make it to dark,
Does that happen with you?

MARY
Like, am I afraid of the dark?

AHMED
Never mind.

MARY
I'm not a *baby*.

A standoff. Was this mean or a joke? Joke. They start laughing.

AHMED

I can't watch scary movies.

Can't be alone.

I get those, what do you call it?

When your chest gets all...

MARY

Like you can't breathe?

AHMED

Right.

MARY

Sure.

No big deal.

Those are normal!

AHMED

Panic attacks.

MARY

Everyone gets those.

No, seriously.

I read about panic.

It's an animal thing.

For predators.

It's good.

It's good for you.

Pause. Ahmed buries his face in his hands. Mary cautiously moves towards him. She places a hand on his shoulder.

AHMED

After we cut the cord.

I held my son.

And where joy is supposed to live.

Only fear. Hopeless empty.

I am not a person.

How can I be a father if I am not a person?

MARY

You're a person.

(Beat.)

I promise you're a person.

(Beat.)

Look, I can't even imagine.

Sending him off to school.

And you don't know.

You don't know if he'll be safe.

AHMED

That's not it.

(Beat.)

Do you remember why I came to Lyla School?

(Beat.)

I bit a kid's face.

Like Hannibal Lecter.

I was so-

MARY

Ahmed-

AHMED

I was so *angry*.

All the time.

(Beat.)

So, what if my son turns out like Matthew?

(Beat.)

What if he gets all the worst parts?

MARY

He won't.

AHMED

You don't know that.

Beat.

MARY

You weren't angry.

That's not how I remember it.

You just didn't have a buffer.

AHMED
A buffer?

MARY
Yeah, you know...

She fully sits up.

MARY
You let everything in.
Most people have kind of like a... protective casing?
But you were too open.
Like if your heart was a bank, it'd get robbed all the time.
(*Beat. She smiles.*)
So your son.
He'll probably be like that.
Everything in.
And I don't think it's bad.
I think it's good.

Ahmed shakes his head, chuckles.

MARY
I'm being serious!

AHMED
I know.
Thank you.

MARY
You're welcome.

Beat. Ahmed sits up.

MARY
Your flight.

AHMED
Yeah.

MARY
Time to go.

(Pause.)

Ahmed, how come you never tried to contact me?

(Beat.)

I've been having this dream.

It's Magda.

And Mikeal alive again.

And they're in space.

And they're wearing these goofy helmets.

But Mikeal is just calmly pointing out everything.

"There's Alpha Majoris"

"There's Venus."

AHMED

Jupiter.

MARY

What?

No.

Not Jupiter.

Who said Jupiter?

(Beat.)

I went from school to school.

It was hard to make friends.

Everyone was always staring at me.

And my dad...

I always figured.

I figured you'd find me sometime.

You'd appear.

Out of nowhere.

But time kept going.

It didn't stop.

And you never showed up.

So eventually

I just had to accept.

Um.

You didn't need me.

I always thought you did.

But you didn't.

AHMED

I'm here now.

MARY

Yeah.
And you're leaving.

Pause.

AHMED
I think.
Maybe
I just wanted to choose who to be bound to.
I didn't want my best friend
To be my best friend.
Cuz of some unspeakable tragic event.

MARY
Except we loved each other way before that.

AHMED
Mary-

MARY
The unspeakable tragic event had nothing to do with it.

AHMED
Mary, we were kids.

MARY
Yes.
We were.

Pause. They look at the stars. Ahmed gets up. He goes to exit.

MARY
Hey, you forgot your bag.

Ahmed stops. He honestly forgot it. He turns back. He walks to Mary, doesn't look at her, picks up the bag. He starts to walk off. He turns back. Pause. In one swift movement, he unzips the bag and turns it over.

The bag is filled with letters. They pile out, hundreds of them. Ahmed shakes the bag clean.

A long moment of them both staring at the pile of letters.

AHMED

I got teased in high school.

Bullied.

(Beat.)

No.

I got tortured.

MARY

High school sucked.

AHMED

Yeah.

It did.

Right?

(Small beat.)

These kids followed me home one day.

All the way and they stood outside.

I locked myself in my room.

(Beat.)

I just wanted someone to talk to.

(Beat. Ahmed walks over to the pile of letters.)

I guess it became

Kind of a compulsion.

He picks up one of the letters. Looks at it. Drops it back in the pile.

AHMED

So I started when I was fifteen.

And I didn't stop until I was twenty-seven.

MARY

Why did you stop?

AHMED

I met my wife.

It no longer felt appropriate.

Pause. They both consider the letters. They both speak, almost at the same time.

MARY

Do you really want me to read these?

AHMED

I needed you.

Beat.

Mary walks to Ahmed. Looks like she is going to put her arms around him. Instead, she takes off his bloody clothes. He does the same for her. They stand staring at each other.

Time passes. Ahmed is gone. Mary drifts off to sleep.

Mary wakes up in the pile of letters. She is disoriented for a moment, then remembers. She squints into the emerging morning. She picks up one of the letters, opens the envelope. She sits cross-legged and reads.

Music comes up. Fading stars give way to bright, piercing sunrise.

END OF PLAY

CLOWN ROOM

By Brian Kettler

APPROXIMATE RUNNING TIME: 10 Minutes.

SYNOPSIS: “Jessie, a courageous young girl, battles her evil stepmother in the terrifying clown room.”

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CLOWN ROOM

Blackness. The demonic sound of clowns laughing. Absolutely terrifying. One by one, lights up in different areas of a clown-themed child's bedroom gone dark and horrific. Many clown dolls, large and small. Clown painted ceiling, and clown wallpaper. A clown mural. Finally, lights up on Jessie, 8 or 9. She is sitting up in her bed, terrified, clutching blankets around her. She is afraid of clowns. She darts her eyes around, scared that one of the clown dolls will come alive and attack her. She wants to scream, but will not allow herself to do it.

Very carefully, Jessie gets out of bed. She stands up. She takes small steps. She is careful not to touch any of the clowns. She crosses to her closet. She opens it quietly. Spotlight on a single tiger costume hanging up in the closet. Jessie puts it on.

Jessie, wearing the tiger costume, sits in front of her vanity mirror (Clown-themed). A book sits on the table. Expertly, Jessie draws black stripes on her face. She finishes the last one, and puts the pencil down. She admires her work. She does a subtle growl.

She hops back to the bed. She grabs her tiger book. She reaches under the bed and grabs a flashlight. She starts to read. She stops. She grabs a tape player from under the bed. She plays jungle sounds. She goes back to the book.

Unseen to Jessie, Marjorie enters, stands in the doorway. She is in her late 30's- early 40s. She wears a fancy, silk nightgown and slippers. She watches Jessie from the shadows. Marjorie is straight-up evil from the second we see her. No build up. No backstory. Just evil. After a few moments, she speaks.

MARJORIE

Trouble sleeping?

Jessie snaps up from the book. Sees Marjorie. Frozen with fear for a beat. Then, she presses stop on the tape player. Silence.

Marjorie strolls around the room. She admires the clowns. She seems to be looking for something, but very casually.

MARJORIE

What are you reading about?

JESSIE

Bengal tigers.

MARJORIE

That's a very cute outfit.

JESSIE

It's not cute.

MARJORIE

Jessie, dear?

JESSIE

Fierce. It's s'posed to be-

MARJORIE

Jessie, do you like your new room?

Marjorie stops. Stares down Jessie. Jessie doesn't answer. Marjorie resumes her evil strolling.

MARJORIE

Your father thought maybe a jungle theme.
(*Waves her hand dismissively*) Because of the whole tiger thing.

JESSIE

Which jungle?

MARJORIE

But *I* thought-

JESSIE

(*Very interested*) The Amazon jungle?

MARJORIE

I thought you would like the clowns.

(Pause. Marjorie narrows her eyes into slits).
And you do like the clowns. Don't you?

Beat.

JESSIE

They're fine.

MARJORIE

Uh-huh.
(Small beat.)
And you're not *scared* of the clowns?

JESSIE

No.

MARJORIE

Good. Good. Because if you ever do. Get scared. We're right down the hall. You can just come on in and cuddle up with us.

JESSIE

I would never ever do that.

MARJORIE

No shame in it.

JESSIE

I'm not a frickin' baby.

MARJORIE

Jessie, dear. *Language.*

JESSIE

You're not my mother.

MARJORIE

You're right.
(Small beat.)
I'm not.

Marjorie finds what she is looking for. A Jack-in-the-Box (Clown-themed, obviously). Marjorie picks up the Jack-in-the-Box, looks it over. She

walks to the bed. She sits. Jessie cowers. Very slowly, Marjorie sets the Jack-in-the-Box down on the bed. She winds it.

As the Jack-in-the-Box winds, Marjorie stares Jessie down, daring her to make eye contact. Marjorie hums along with the Jack-in-the-Box music. Jessie shakes with fear. Then...

POP! The Jack-in-the-Box flies open. Out pops a very scary clown face. We hear some horrible clown laughter. Jessie screams with fear. She jumps to the farthest corner of the bed. Marjorie smiles her tight smile. Beat. Then.

Marjorie takes a folded piece of paper out of her nightgown pocket. She unfolds it and reads.

MARJORIE

(Reading) Jessie Janakowski's Ultimate. All-Time. Top-Secret. List of. Fears.

Jessie crawls one step towards Marjorie. She is now a little more pissed off than scared.

JESSIE

Where did you-?

MARJORIE

Number ten.

JESSIE

(Seething with anger) Where did you get that?

MARJORIE

Number *ten*.

(Small beat.)

Clowns.

Marjorie pats the space on the bed next to her.

MARJORIE

Come here, sweetie. Sit next to me.

JESSIE

Why?

MARJORIE

Because I want to tell you how this ends.

Beat. Jessie crawls a little closer

MARJORIE

Your father's told you. Our very special news.

JESSIE

I'm gonna have a baby brother.

Marjorie chokes back disgust.

MARJORIE

Well. Jessie. Darling.

I feel that it's very important. When the baby arrives. We need a fresh start. A clean house.

JESSIE

What do you mean, a clean house?

MARJORIE

Have you ever thought about boarding School?

JESSIE

No!

Bexley Academy?

JESSIE

I'd have to live there.

MARJORIE

Yes. You would.

JESSIE

I won't do it.

MARJORIE

Yes. You will.

JESSIE

What about my friends? What about my school? What about my-?

Marjorie cuts in sharply, holding the list.

MARJORIE

There are nine more items on this list. So the clowns, dear? The clowns are just the beginning.

Small beat.

JESSIE

Why are you doing this?

MARJORIE

When your father introduced us. All I could think was what a hard, dirty, disgusting girl. And I was worried. How could I ever get through to this little monster? But then it hit me.

(Beat.)

See, all little girls. Once you strip away the grit and the grime.

(Smiles) And the tiger stripes. All little girls are the same. They're all afraid.

JESSIE

Not me.

Marjorie picks up the list.

MARJORIE

Number *nine*.

JESSIE

Thank you for the clown room. I love it. Clowns are so *funny*. And cute. And cool.

MARJORIE

Hmmm.

JESSIE

Maybe next week. Next weekend. You can take me to the goddamn circus!

MARJORIE

Jessie, dear? Your bravado is thoroughly unconvincing.

JESSIE

All right, I'm scared!

(Small beat.)

Spiders.
And snakes too.
(*Jessie shakes her head. She smiles.*)
But it's all *temporary*.

MARJORIE

Sure.

JESSIE

See, right now I'm just a cub. But a female Bengal Tiger can weigh up to 400 pounds.

MARJORIE

Too bad you're not a Bengal Tiger.

JESSIE

Oh yeah? Who says?

Jessie lets out a roar.

MARJORIE

Adorable.
(*Beat.*)
Bexley Academy is my first and final offer.

JESSIE

Well, I respectfully decline.

MARJORIE

Please think it over. Nice new school.

JESSIE

There's uniforms.

MARJORIE

Nice new friends.

JESSIE

They make you wear *uniforms*.

MARJORIE

You can go away. And live. Or stay here.
(*She grins dismissively*)

And fight.

Beat. Marjorie presents her cheek for Jessie to kiss. A standoff. Finally, Jessie relents. She leans in and kisses Marjorie's cheek. She backs off, ashamed. Marjorie savors her victory.

MAJORIE

Isn't that funny?

JESSIE

(Fuming) What?

MAJORIE

You thought you were a tiger. But as it turns out. You're only a housecat. A sweet little tabby. A nice, tiny-

SUDDENLY, Jessie leaps up and bites Marjorie on the cheek, ferociously. Marjorie screams in pain. Jessie leaps down off the bed, full tiger mode, assumes a predator stance.

MARJORIE

You-!

JESSIE

I choose fight.

MARJORIE

You *bit* me!

JESSIE

I *always* choose fight.

Jessie continues to growl and hiss at Marjorie. She is a barely-caged wild animal. Marjorie cowers in a corner of the room. She is about to attack when...

Richard, late 40's, enters, wearing pajamas.

RICHARD

What in the world is going on in here?

A full, frozen, silent pause. Marjorie looks to Jessie, Jessie looks to Marjorie. Neither is quite sure how to proceed.

JESSIE

We were just playing.

RICHARD

Playing?

JESSIE

(Scrambling) I had a nightmare. But Marjorie helped. She was reading to me.

RICHARD

Oh yeah?

JESSIE

From my tiger book.

RICHARD

Well, that's terrific!

JESSIE

Can you keep reading? Can we keep playing? Please?

RICHARD

(To Marjorie) What do you say?

MAJORIE

(Pretty scared) It's getting pretty late.

JESSIE

But Marjorie
We're not finished yet.

A tiny standoff. Jessie smiles sweetly at Marjorie. Marjorie grits her teeth and smiles.

They all sit on the bed. Marjorie sits between Jessie and Richard. Jessie places the book roughly in Marjorie's lap.

JESSIE

I think we were on page seven.

MARJORIE

Of course.
Page seven.

(Marjorie clears her throat. She reads.)

“The Bengal tiger is a dominant and carnivorous predator. The Bengal tiger is very patient; She stalks her prey and waits for the right time to strike. She has very strong jaws and teeth. The Bengal tiger has an excellent sense of smell and superior vision. Due to the size and power of the Bengal tiger, she has no natural predators in her native environment.”

Marjorie puts the book down. Throughout this entire thing, Jessie has been staring Marjorie down. Like a tiger about to rip apart an antelope. Marjorie looks up from the book, to see Jessie grinning at her. When Jessie speaks to Richard, she is totally in “innocent little girl-mode”.

RICHARD

She just loves tigers.

JESSIE

Daddy, can I ask you a question?

RICHARD

Of course.

JESSIE

When the new baby comes. Will things be very different?

RICHARD

Well yes, of course. But only in the best way.

JESSIE

It's just. Marjorie said...

(Beat. Jessie buries her head in Richard's shoulder.)

Oh, well, never mind.

RICHARD

What is it, Jessie?

Jessie looks up. Quasi-Full House moment.

JESSIE

Okay. Well. It's just Marjorie said. When the baby comes. There might not be enough room for me.

Richard explodes in laughter.

RICHARD

Oh, sweetie, Marjorie would never say that! You must have misunderstood. Tell her, hon.

MARJORIE

Um.

JESSIE

Is that it, Marjorie? Did I *misunderstand*?

MARJORIE

Yes of course.

JESSIE

You don't want me to go away?

MARJORIE

No. Or course.

JESSIE

And I can sleep in your bed? With you? And the baby?

MAJORIE

Well, now-

RICHARD

Hey, I just had a crazy brainstorm. Slumber Party. Our bedroom. I'll make cocoa. We'll stay up all night! It will be so much fun!

Richard hops up, excited. He goes to the door. He stops, turns back. Puts his hands on his hips.

RICHARD

I just love this family.

Richard exits. Jessie and Marjorie stare after him. The mood in the room shifts. Substantial pause. Jessie turns to her, grins her tiger grin,

JESSIE

C'mere.

Pause. Marjorie doesn't respond. VERY SLOWLY, Jessie crawls like a tiger to Marjorie. Marjorie continues to retreat.

JESSIE

I said, c'mere. Come closer.

MARJORIE.

What do you want?

Jessie gets all the way up into Marjorie's face.

JESSIE

I want to tell you how this ends.

*SMASHCUT
BLACKOUT
END OF PLAY*